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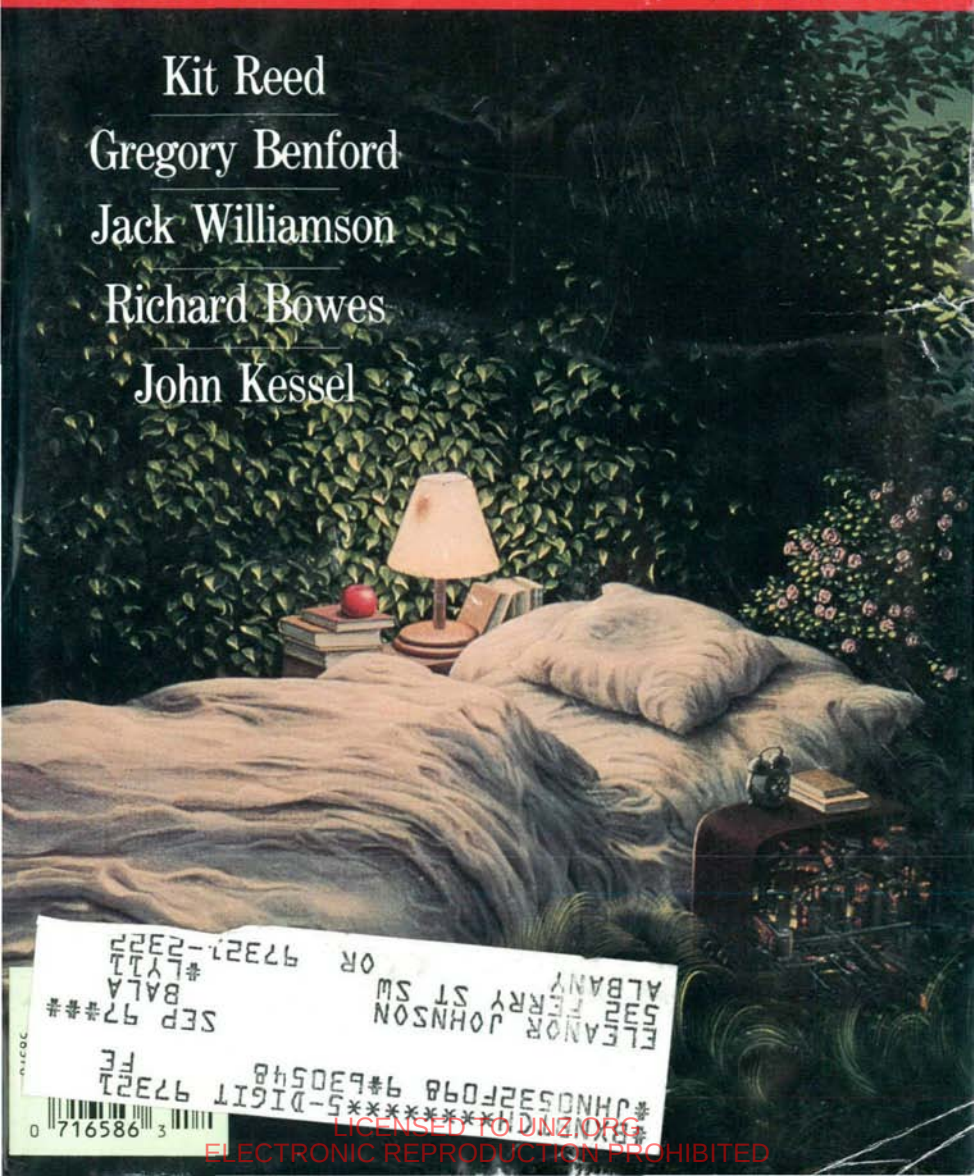

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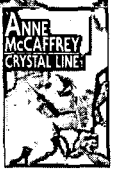

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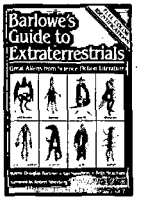

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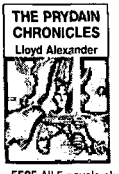

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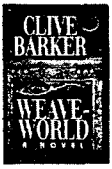

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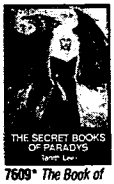

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

ON NOVEMBER 19, 1993, Eastern New Mexico University at Portales will hold a celebration in honor of Jack Williamson's 85 years of life and 65 years as a science fiction writer. This should be a fitting tribute to the man whose earliest memories include riding in a covered wagon and who has now witnessed the wonders of outer space; a man whose writing career started about the time Hugo Gernsback coined the phrase "science fiction" and whose career continues through (and now past) the newest word this genre has added to the language: "cyberpunk."

Jack's life and career reflect the history of our genre. He was born in 1908 in Arizona Territory. His pioneer parents moved to a mountain ranch in Sonora, then to an irrigation project at Pecos. When Jack was seven, he rode by covered wagon to his new home in Eastern New Mexico, where he remains to this day.

He grew up in "a severe natural environment." He writes that the turning point of his youth "was finding Gernsback's new *Amazing Stories*, which opened an escape from dust storms and drought into the more exciting worlds of science fiction." He sold his first story to that magazine in 1928, and made a "sort of" living at writing from that point forward.

In World War II, he worked as an Army Air Force weather forecaster. When the war ended, he married an old school friend, Blanche Slaten Harp, and settled in Portales. At that point, he began publishing novels, including *The Legion of Space*, *Darker than You Think*, and *The Humanoids*. He also created a comic strip, *Beyond Mars*, that ran for three years in the *New York Sunday News*.

He returned to college in the 1950s, earning a B.A. and an M.A. at Eastern New Mexico University. He taught English there until he retired in 1977, although he continues to teach an occasional class. He was a

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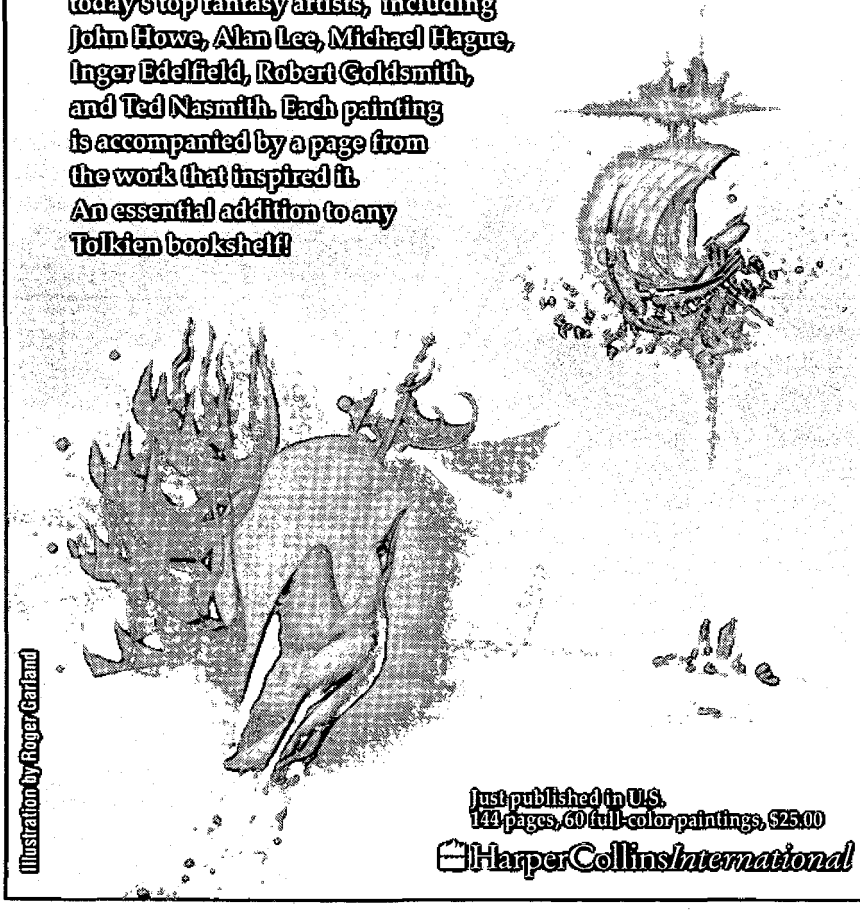

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Valerie J. Freireich has sold stories to Writers of the Future *and* Tomorrow Magazine. *She has just sold her first novel to Roc Books. The novel,* Becoming Human, *shares its setting with the story that follows.*

"Testament" marks Valerie's first appearance in F&SF. *"Testament" is an intriguing sf story, with an unusual angle.*

Testament

By Valerie J. Freireich

I. Stone Town

SHORTLY AFTER LEARNING he was married, Gray Bridger realized he might need to kill his wife. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bridger," the deputy dispatch officer had said, her bureaucratic indifference belying the expression of sympathy. "You automatically forfeited approval to exit the Protectorate of Testament upon your marriage to a native woman. You can't purchase a ticket to Darien, or anywhere within the Polite Harmony of Worlds."

"What do you mean?" Gray's hand tightened on his hard-earned money, Harmony credits being difficult to come by. "I'm not married. Marriage isn't even a custom here on Testament."

The offie bureaucrat had looked up from her desk display to gaze at him directly for the first time. Her washed-out blue eyes narrowed as, taking in his dark face and lean physique, she realized he was a native and not one of the occasional offie workers trapped by unkind circumstances on Testament. "Oh," she said, primly. "Indigenous inhabitants aren't eligible to enter the Harmony, anyway, Mr. Bridger. Testament is under permanent quarantine."

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Heedless of office protocol, he tapped his fingers on her desktop near the display. "Look at your file, please, Deputy. I'm approved to leave. I'm a singleton — like you. Standard human, not Altered."

She grimaced, but quickly scanned the results of the tests he'd undergone to prove he wasn't unacceptably Altered, as were other natives. "Yes, I see," she said without looking back at him. "You *were* eligible, but your marriage negates that." She snapped off the display and his file disappeared. "Yesterday the Compound Council of Testament registered your marriage to another native, listed as a 'far cousin' named Dancer Bridger. I'm sorry, sir, but you can no longer leave Testament." She'd already glanced beyond Gray. "Yes, sir?" she said eagerly to a tall offworlder, an official by the look of him. Dazed, Gray Bridger moved out of the way.

Once outside Dispatch, his rejected Harmony credits still clutched in his hand, Gray leaned against a corridor wall and tried to think. He'd been married by fiat of the Compound Council. That meant his grandmother was behind it, since she was Bridger Dome's chief precaster and representative to the Council. He hit his fist against the wall. The thin metal facing made a dull, surprised sound. Married. He imagined his wife, a woman like his sisters, like all the women he had ever known, with ghosts staring at him from behind their deceptively young eyes. Even if she wasn't a precaster, she would still have a soul a thousand years old, manifested in her preternaturally wise expression. One of them. "No," he whispered. He stared at the sunstones set into the ceiling until his eyes burned. "No." He would kill his supposed wife before one of those ghost-ridden women would trap him on Testament. He could make it appear an accident.

He left the building, ignoring the sourness at the back of his throat, like the taste of old blood. The paper Harmony credits fluttered in his fist, ruffled by the springtime breeze, reminding Gray of birds struggling to break free. He stuffed them into his jacket pocket. The door opened, bumping him. Startled, Gray grunted and looked back. It was the man who'd been in line behind him. At Gray's glare, he said mildly, "Sorry."

"You all apologize too much," Gray said testily, "and it never means a thing."

The man bowed in the deep Harmony style. "I do apologize. The impact was entirely unintentional." He stared openly at Gray. "You're a native, aren't you? I'm looking for a guide."

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"Not interested." Gray turned away.

"I'll pay well," the man said to Gray's back. Bracing himself against the wind, Gray started toward the lifting lines that led out of the offie controlled Exchange district and down to the domes and blocks of Stone Town proper. Footsteps behind caused Gray to increase his pace. The wind was worse on the hillside than it was on Stone Town's plain below, but the view was magnificent. He paused at the entrance to the tunnel where the lifting lines began, staring out at the overlook of Stone Town.

"Testament. You should call this world Entropy. It's one huge monument to the dead."

Gray twisted around. The offie had followed him and was looking out at Stone Town. The stranger gestured at the domes, and the light caught on the facets of his gemstone rings. "The capitol is a cemetery," he said. "Magnificent engineering, though."

Even from a distance, the family domes were huge. The First Comers on Testament and their descendants had built on a massive scale. Immense half circles of golden stone, some with bands of diamond glass, the domes rose in a cluster at the center of Stone Town, dwarfing the pastel blocks composing the remainder of the living city. Bridger Dome was the largest intact dome, the only one with an opening at its apex. It was called "Eye on the World," and rose six hundred feet above the ground. The sight didn't inspire pride in Gray, however, just resentment. "I'm not interested in acting as a guide," Gray said. "I don't need the Harmony money anymore, since I can't leave."

The man turned to him. "Your marriage is unfortunate. It's legally valid, since it's registered with the proper local authority, and if the woman is like the rest of them here on Testament.... The Harmony will not let you abandon a spouse, or authorize emigration for one of these freaks."

The word "freak" jarred Gray, who had heard the word applied too often to him since adolescence, when memories of his mothers in the Bridger line had not come in. "Who are you?"

The offie bowed again. "My name is Martin Penn. I've recently arrived on Testament. I couldn't avoid overhearing your conversation with the dispatch deputy." He looked back at the city and pointed. "What happened to that dome, the broken one?"

Gray didn't bother to look. "Shak Dome fell about the time the Harmony's quickships found Testament, a hundred years ago. Until then it

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was the largest. The Shak still use it, though, what's left of them."

"For interment of the dead?"

"Yes." Gray glanced at his city. From this distance, it seemed an abandoned ruin from the antique past. Somewhere down there was his wife, Dancer. He didn't know the woman, but he knew what to expect. Bridger women tended to be dark, slender, and intelligent. Her line memories would stretch back to Earth and the founder of the Bridger line, Janet Bridger, though unless she was a precaster her recall of the far past would be subconscious, her own experiences intertwined with a mentally fossilized heredity.

"I want to get inside one of those domes," Penn said. "To meet a precaster, but not one of the fakes around Edgemarket that prey on Harmony visitors. The real precasters have refused to see me so far." He turned to Gray.

"The domes are generally just for the line," Gray said, answering the unspoken question.

"I'll pay 150c," Penn said.

That was half the fare to Darien, a fortune for an hour's work. Gray didn't want to guide this insistent stranger, but the man's authoritative manner and the arrogance behind it were intimidating, as was the money. "I'll bring you to Bridger Dome," Gray said slowly. "No guarantees you'll get inside, though."

The man smiled and reached into his pocket. "You're main line in the Bridger family, aren't you? A direct descendant of the founder through the youngest daughters? You'll get me inside."

II. Not Prince Hamlet

The air in Bridger Dome had a parched quality, like something that had been burned a long time before. It was always dim inside the rotunda, the light limited to that provided by the glass bands along the wall and the Eye, except at night when thousands of tiny bulbs — and at that, only a fraction of those available were ever lit — were set aglow. Wide galleries went halfway up the wall of the dome and beyond them the inner surface loomed like a stone and glass sky, as if undecided as to whether to fall and crush the watchers or to rise away into the open air visible in the Eye. Beside Gray, Martin Penn gawked at the intimidating volume of interior space, arms behind his back, staring up through the Eye. "What ever happened to the

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people who could do this?" he asked. "Why are all the slowboat-settled worlds such backwaters?"

Gray shrugged. Presumably the precasters remembered precisely how the domes had been built, but Testament's vigorous human expansion had ceased when the quickships arrived. Precasters no longer built and planned; they tended the dead. "They're different," he said, suspicious of this offie who pretended they were chance acquaintances and yet knew so much about Testament and Gray. "They take a longer view."

Penn looked back at Gray, shaking his head as if freeing it from the grip of his distance vision. "Inertia," Penn said, answering his own question. "They don't do anything but reminisce." He studied the rows of galleries and the closed doors of family tombs lining the lower portion of the dome, ignoring Gray's favorite area, the Earth garden, where species of Earth plants unable to survive on Testament's surface had been preserved inside the dome for hundreds of years, waiting until the world was readied for them. Penn pointed enthusiastically behind Gray. "Is that a precaster?"

Gray looked around. An old woman approached. She was thin, tall, and elegantly draped in a long white dress and blue-edged nois-skin shawl. Only her white hair and wrinkles gave away her advanced age. She walked directly toward Gray and Martin Penn. Penn bowed, the foreign gesture odd inside the dome. "Please, lady. I have questions to ask. I've tried to get permission for a week but none of the domes will answer me. I'll pay." He reached into his pocket, then stopped at her upraised hand.

"No." She tilted her head, studying him. "You're no tourist. Who are you, friend of Gray?"

Penn studied her and suddenly bowed again. "I am an Ahman of the Academy, from Center, the capital of the Polite Harmony of Worlds. My name is Martin Penn. I have questions to ask a precaster, lady, if I may speak with you privately?"

She shook her head, chuckling softly as if she was entertained, and winked at Gray. "I won't answer your questions, but I will tell you something you might want to know." Without awaiting an answer, she closed her eyes and swayed, slowly picking up speed. Gray watched, amazed. Penn was wide-eyed, fascinated by her every move. Bubbling sounds came from her lips, then the sound changed pitch and became sharp, brief screams, like a wild creature in urgent pain. The sound echoed in the dome; Gray felt the

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reverberations as chills down his spine. A group of men conversing at the nearest entrance arch stared at her, then looked away, smiling. Suddenly, she stopped, opened her eyes and poked Penn's chest. "You are on a personal quest, and you will be answered if you persevere. Now go!"

Penn took an instinctive, involuntary step backward at her stern command, then unsmilingly observed the older woman.

"Gray, stay here!" she said. "A prince of Bridger Dome doesn't need moral support from an offie."

Gray gawked at her, speechless.

"Prince?" Penn said, looking speculatively at Gray.

She waved her hand. "Prince Hamlet since his marriage — do you see the hesitations? Or perhaps he's only Prufrock."

Penn observed her for a moment, then bowed. "Lady precaster, I'd like to speak with you again, when charlatans have ceased invading Bridger Dome."

The woman clapped her hands together as if chasing animals away. "Go on!" she shouted at Penn. "Go!" She was grinning.

"You'd better leave," Gray said uneasily.

"Another time, then," Penn said with dignity, and strolled out of Bridger Dome as if unconcerned, but his movements were stiff.

"Well, Grandmother, what was that show?" Gray asked when Penn was gone.

"Impressed?" she asked, chuckling to herself. Some precasters were preoccupied by the dignity of their role, but never Gray's grandmother. "I decided to give him a memory worth recalling since you were the one to bring him into the dome. You are my favorite grandchild." She glanced in the direction Penn had taken. "It may have been a mistake. He seems astute. We know so little about the universe off Testament. They censor what we see, and allow none of us to leave and then return. But then, they don't know us, either." She sighed heavily and smiled at Gray, who wondered why his grandmother had refused to precast for Penn. Usually the domes were anxious to hear the questions important off-worlders asked for what those questions implied about the Harmony of Worlds. "Well, Gray, are you visiting your mother's necropolis or have you come to be introduced to your bride?"

Gray moved a step backward, instinctively seeking distance between

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himself and his grandmother's eyes. He stared down at the floor, fists clenched, at the reminder of his marriage. "I came to tell you that you can keep me on Testament for now, but sooner or later I'll get away. I don't belong here; I can never be happy."

"Sloppy thinking, Gray," she said. "Happiness is no measurement of life. Happiness is an illusion created by the recognition that you're useful; anything else is selfishness."

"So you want me on Testament, unhappy and unselfish."

She came close. He stood as motionless as a soldier on parade; his grandmother was alien and frightening at the same time that she was lovingly familiar. The combination left him feeling lonely. "Gray, as a singleton, you may lack your mothers' memories, but there is a part of us in your soul. If you leave now, without Dancer, you'll die alone among strangers in that black void of stars, useless and extremely unhappy. You need Testament beside you."

"I didn't ask for a precast!"

"I can't control what I know," his grandmother chided him. She hugged him quickly, ignoring his stiffness. "Precasting is informed intuition. If intuition is an unconscious insight drawn from an accumulation of data, then those of us with the most data — and sufficient intelligence — necessarily have greater awareness, greater recognition of reality. I tell you, Gray, this marriage is for the best."

"Whose best? Bridger Dome, so you won't be publicly humiliated when a member of the main line leaves Testament? It can't be for my good. I want to live where I'm like everyone else, where I'm normal."

"I hurt for you, Gray. It's difficult to be a singleton, notwithstanding that every line begins with one. I've seen your disappointment and frustration at your failure to acquire your mothers' memories, like all your friends. But being a precaster isn't the only way to serve your people. Come with me. Meet Dancer." She extended her hand.

"No. I'm leaving, Grandmother," Gray said, but even to himself he sounded like a stubborn child.

"Wait." His grandmother put her arm through Gray's and tugged him toward the garden with wiry strength. "Walk awhile with an old woman. You've obviously forgotten the Earth literature I taught you, but do you remember your lessons of how we came to Testament?" She didn't wait for

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his answer. "Ours was the third slowboat sent out from Earth, almost a thousand years ago. We don't know what happened to the others, although perhaps the Harmony does. Our ancestors were altered — it wasn't a dirty word then — so that we retained the memory of the earlier generations as a kind of mini-racial memory tagged with our mitochondrial DNA. The theory, as I understand it, was to prevent the loss of vital information and the memory of Earth during the two hundred year transit from there to here. Since mitochondrial DNA is inherited only from female ancestors, only female memories are passed on. Men know it, which is why so many of you are sour. But we know each other. Men and women of a line have generations of memories in common, shared lifetimes and attitudes, except for the occasional singleton, like you. And the lines understand each other from those same generations of living side by side. Then the quickships came, despising us, and we have had to guard against a threat we cannot see. You are one thing that we are not: acceptable to the Polite Harmony of Worlds. That can be useful."

"For what?" he burst out, interrupting her lecture. "What can I do that everyone else can't do better?"

They had reached the garden outskirts. Small plants with large flowers lined the path they walked, but the glory of the garden, the trees, were still ahead: tall, gracefully branching shapes that never would survive a winter outside the dome. The environment had already changed to one more humid, more highly scented than was normal on Testament. The sweet spiciness didn't remind Gray of anything except this garden, but his grandmother smiled and her eyes unfocused slightly as momentarily she reminisced. Swiftly though, as he tried to slip away, she said, "You can marry Dancer."

"You've already married me to her."

"Don't pout, Gray. It's unappealing in a man. I mean that you can marry her properly, bind yourself to her. She will also be a shelter for you. Come meet her. You'll be pleased. She's beautiful."

Gray stopped. He suspected that up ahead, in the hidden recesses of the Earth garden, Dancer was waiting. "I don't want any wife from Testament," he said. "If you take me to her, then I swear I'll kill her, Grandmother, just to be let alone." So much for an apparent accident, he thought. Just as well.

She laughed, sounding almost young. "I don't believe that, Gray. I know you. There's too much heart in you; it's stronger than any hurt. You're only

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being melodramatic in reaction to disappointment. All right. Go home. Next time you visit, you can meet Dancer."

Gray scowled. "She lives inside the dome? Then she's a precaster."

"No, no," his grandmother said. "She's no precaster. You'll see what she is when you're in a more tranquil mood. Now go." She released her hold on Gray's arm.

They were in the center of the garden, surrounded by vegetation so thick that it was impossible to see that they were inside Bridger Dome. He hesitated. Since adolescence this had been the place he considered his true home because there was nothing of Testament in it. It was the promise of his future, the single place he was always reluctant to leave. Without a word he turned and walked away.

III. Symmetry

"MELANY KANE called," Gray's youngest sister, Mead, said that evening when Gray came into the kitchen to help prepare dinner. "She asked if you wanted a position on her next expedition, as long as you have a wife and you're staying on Testament." Mead smiled, looking almost like a mischievous seventeen-year-old, but the ancient, pitiless edge was there in the expanse of teeth she showed.

"Kanes are never tactful," Eris interjected. She was their oldest sister still living in their mother's house, which was Mead's now by right of being the youngest daughter, except that Mead had no children. Gray took over from Eris, kneading the biscuit dough, so his sister, heavily pregnant, could sit.

"Melany's all right." She probably had meant well. Despite her centuries of memories, Melany was reassuringly gauche at times. She'd captained several nois-hunting expeditions of which Gray had been a member. They had been opportunities to earn Harmony credits on the sale of the skins and, for Gray, a chance to avoid reminders of his differences from other people. Hunting nois required silence, luck, and quick reactions, but not too much in the way of remembered experience. He was comfortable in the outlands.

"Too bad they didn't marry you to Melany Kane," Mead said with a

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wicked grin. "Of course, she wouldn't want a singleton to father her children, just in case, so perhaps they asked and she refused." Mead chopped carrots for the stew as if each cut was an execution, then tossed the pieces into the pot.

"Leave Gray alone," Eris said. "I'm glad he's staying." She patted her protruding belly and left a dusting of white flour on her clothes. "She'll want an uncle."

"Or a permanent child to play with." Mead's mouth pinched tight. "Why am I the only one in the family to call him what he is? A freak. Grandmother won't let him leave because the precasters don't want to admit that they were wrong to school him."

"Memory isn't the same as intelligence," Gray said. "The Harmony people do just fine with what they can learn in a single lifetime."

Mead laughed. "Keep telling yourself that you're all right, Gray. Maybe someday someone will believe it."

Gray pounded on the biscuit dough, pushing it flat with aggressive energy. Educating children wasn't economically productive on Testament, where everyone remembered basic skills, and more, at adolescence, but a select few Bridger children were educated in the dome, taught to read, stuffed with information and analytical skills. "Grandmother brought me to Bridger Dome instead of you — that's your real complaint. A thousand years of memories and you're still petty. You'll never be a precaster. Maybe it's your fault, Mead, not mine."

"Maybe Grandmother knew then that you were a freak and that's why she brought you to the dome." Mead looked up from slicing vegetables as her usual partner, Learner Wolf, came into the kitchen. He glanced from Mead to Gray and frowned.

"Arguing with him doesn't get you anywhere," Learner said. "He couldn't inherit even if he wasn't a singleton."

"So? Neither can you," Gray said to Learner. "Man."

Learner looked through Gray as if he was transparent, then turned to Mead. "I discovered something interesting today about your new sister-in-law." He leaned against a counter. Gray pretended not to listen, but Learner was speaking as much to him as he was to the two women. "Gray's new wife is an alia."

There was a moment's silence, then Mead exploded into laughter.

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"What?" Eris was indignant. "I don't believe it."

"Funny, isn't it? Symmetrical. A man who remembers nothing but his own life and a woman who remembers everyone else so well that she doesn't exist as an individual." Learner chuckled.

"Grandmother would never do that!" Eris protested. "Gray — she wouldn't hurt you. She loves you."

Gray stopped working. Eris' memories of their grandmother necessarily stopped at their mother's conception; she couldn't possibly remember anything about Gray. He pinched off a wad of dough and rolled it like a worry bead in his hands, then cast it onto the board, the force of the impact flattening the ball. He was not only trapped, but insulted. Victims of alia syndrome had all the past lives of their mothers present in conscious memory from birth; an alia never had a childhood to become his or her own person before being bombarded by the centuries of lives from their mother lines. Most alias were killed at birth, but in some areas of the outlands victims of alia syndrome were compelled by drugs or mental tricks to perform emulations, playing roles of their own predecessors, roles they felt were true even as they knew that they were not. Like priestess whores of some ancient dead religion, they provided a diversion for their descendants: In a small outland village Gray had once been offered sex with a girl by her mother. Both had believed they were the mother.

An alia was nothing more than a husk of memory. In a way his grandmother had freed him. One person had blocked his departure from Testament, a woman he'd never met, but now he knew she was a nonentity, an agglomeration of memories inside a shell, with no personality of her own. He knew what he had to do and finally felt that he could do it. He stared at his hands, flexing them, then walked outside. He had to return to Bridger Dome. That was where his wife was, whom he had to force himself to kill.

IV. The Time Traveler

His grandmother was waiting where they had met earlier, as if they'd set an appointment. "Dancer's in her room," she said. She patted his arm, her hands papery smooth and smelling of flowers, then led Gray to the opposite side of the rotunda, to a bank of open lifts.

"What is she like?"

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His grandmother smiled. "It depends on who she is."

So it was true. If a singleton was a freak, then an alia was an abomination. "Does she always emulate someone else?"

"Whenever she's alert. There is no woman 'Dancer' by herself." His grandmother stepped off the lift as it stopped. Gray followed. He looked down, the height making him dizzy. Architecture inside the Exchange district, reflecting that of the Polite Harmony, he guessed, avoided large open spaces, and the rest of Stone Town was built low, against the winter wind.

His grandmother continued. "Sometimes — usually, in fact — the individual past lives come so quickly, so randomly, one after another through her consciousness that none grasps cognizance of reality. There is a mental vacancy."

"That's what you've married me to." He leaned against the railing, which was made of beautifully embossed, sparkling nois skin stretched over stone. Dullness along the upper surface evidenced its use by thousands of Bridgers through the centuries; their hands had left oils embedded in the skin. Gray placed his hand where so many others had stood, feeling a moment of rare kinship with his ancestors.

"There are drugs," she said, drawing him forward along the gallery. "She can be stabilized in an emulation for long periods of time. She was just given a dose for your meeting. Perhaps she'll be my own mother, Tilly, your last common ancestor. If so, be kind!" She grinned, her eyes alight, as when she had teased Martin Penn with her outlandish display of precaster "powers," then she placed her hand against the panel of an unmarked door. It swung open. She moved aside to let Gray pass through first. "Your wife."

After the dim light in the dome, the late-afternoon sunshine in the whitewashed room made Gray blink. Dust motes floated in the light from the huge expanse of diamond glass that was the outer, slightly curved, wall of the dome. Gray drew a sharp breath at the view of Stone Town. The nearest other dome was the Shak; its tumbled, broken edges seemed to enhance the vista, rather than obstruct it, like a landscape painting which needed a focus. It was a better perspective than that from the Exchange district, a view from within rather than from outside. From here Stone Town did not look dead; it was a vibrant, shining place, the Shak Dome only emphasizing the fresh signs of life. Gray entered the room, drawn by the light, and only then did he notice the white painted night table, the single rocking chair and the narrow

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bed. A slim girl lay between the white linen bedsheets, facing away from the door. Her long black hair and the red-brown of her hands exposed on the covers were the only color in the room. Gray turned to his grandmother. She held a finger in front of her lips, smiled, nodded and began closing the door.

"Wait!" Gray called.

It closed. He stared a moment at the blank white wall, suspecting he was being manipulated, but the levels of possibility were too deep for him. He looked back toward the bed. The girl tossed restlessly as he watched, then settled. This time she was turned toward him. Her lips moved, mumbling something unintelligible. She frowned, trembled, then was quiet.

Gray went to her bedside, then squatted, peering into her face, looking for signs that there was a real person inside the body. He touched her cheek but she didn't react. He stood and stared down at her, then looked at his hands. They were powerful, an adult's. He'd once killed a nois with a knife, the gun having jammed. He'd skinned too many of their scaly, untreated pelts to count and remembered the sticky blood clinging to his fingers. He leaned over and grasped the pillow. His hands sank effortlessly into the soft pillow on either side of her head. The girl turned and again mumbled sounds he didn't understand. He listened, then released the pillow. The imprints of his hands vanished. He went to the tremendous window, staying back from the edge. He felt too close to falling.

Was Dancer more than a repository of dead minds? He would not kill a person — but *was* she someone, or just an animal husk? He remembered ripping out the soft, useless organs from nois and smelled their coarse blood odor again. He turned, observing Dancer, imagining human blood flowing across the pale floor, and nearly gagged. Gray crossed to the rocking chair and sat down to wait. Stone Town spread out before him, the golden sun making even Edgemarket look pretty. Testament was his home, the only place he'd ever lived, but it was a ghetto of Altered humans and he wasn't one of them. He would leave. He would.

It was a long while before Dancer opened her eyes, and she did so slowly, as if unwilling to awaken. She stared, unfocused, at Gray. He said nothing, deferring all judgments until Dancer spoke. Her eyes lost their glazed appearance; abruptly she sat up, then yanked the sheet across her body, covering her bare breasts. She looked once out the window, then quickly back to Gray. "Who are you? Where is this place?" It was an aggressive voice with

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an awkward accent, but her expression was wild and frightened.

"You've lived here all your life," Gray answered. He leaned forward, studying her changed face.

"I've been kidnapped! Who are you? What's this all about?"

"I'm your husband," he said, grimly amused. "Don't you remember?"

The rocking chair creaked as he leaned back. Dancer was silent, searching his face without a glimmer of recognition. Tentatively, she turned aside and gaped at the town outside the dome. "What is this place?" Her tone was softer, amazed.

"That's Stone Town." He spread his right arm wide, indicating the terrain outside. "We're inside Bridger Dome on Testament."

"Bridger Dome," she repeated, turning back to him. "I remember. I gave eggs...Have I been asleep...or something...?" She shook her head, then stopped. Still holding the sheet against her chest with one hand, she used the other to reach for and then inspect a length of her long, black hair. Then she stared at that hand, holding it first close, then at arm's length. "What's going on?" She turned again to Gray. "I'm changed."

Clearly she was an emulation of someone very early. The alia Gray had seen in the outlands had understood her condition and surroundings without surrendering belief in who she was. Still, Dancer *was* just an emulation. He stood up. Her eyes followed him. "Please help me," she whispered, and reached out a hand to him that she was unable to identify as her own.

"Go to sleep," he said, almost as softly as she had spoken. She was helpless and alone.

"No! I want to know — I demand to know — what's going on. You! What's your name?"

He smiled at the once again imperious tone. "Tell me yours."

She hesitated, as if weighing the merits of doing so. "Janet Bridger," she said finally.

Gray returned to the rocking chair. Janet Bridger! The founder of the Bridger line. She had lived even earlier than the First Comers — she'd been born on Earth before the slowboat left.

"You know me," she said flatly, watching him with sharp intelligence but without the frightening depth of a precaster's eyes. "Who are you?"

He wet his lips. "My name is Gray. Gray Bridger. I am your husband — husband to Dancer, whose body you're wearing. I'm a descendant of Janet

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Bridger in the main line of descent, thirty-seventh generation."

"The slowboat people," Dancer said to herself. "No! It wasn't supposed to work like this!" The statement was a plea.

"It doesn't usually," he said. "You're—Dancer, that is—unusual." The woman stared at him, more victim than any singleton, and he felt an unaccountable sympathy. "There are disorders that are unique to the Altered people of Testament, to our peculiar memory."

Her hands waved weakly, requesting silence. She stared down at the pale covers and at her hand without moving. Janet Bridger had died so long ago that even precasters had only fragments of her memories accessible within their own; *Dancer* had never lived. If he was ever going to kill her, now was the time. Gray didn't move; he couldn't do it. "I'm sorry," he said inanely, and headed for the door. It was himself he was sorry for more than this alia whose Janet Bridger persona would disappear soon enough into the tangle of past lives. Unable to kill her, he was trapped on Testament.

"Wait!"

He stopped and looked at her.

"You said you are my husband."

He nodded. "But the marriage is a...formality. To keep me from leaving Testament." He hesitated. She was essentially a woman from a thousand years ago. What could she understand? "As long as I'm married to a woman with multiple life memories, then the Harmony won't let me leave this world."

She watched him uncomprehendingly, but he stared just as hard at her. This *wasn't* a woman with multiple life memories, this was Janet Bridger. Just now, like him, Dancer remembered only one life. She'd test as a singleton on any of the psych tests they'd given him.

Gray crossed the room and knelt beside the bed, looking up into her startled face. "Will you help me? I swear you'll come to no harm, and maybe the two of us can leave Testament together!"

"Leave? Why?" She giggled, but wore an agitated expression. "I've just arrived, and even so, I'm not really here. Am I?" The question was a challenge, but he heard it as an entreaty for a denial.

He sat down on the bed. She watched him hopefully. "I don't know how long you'll be Janet Bridger. There are drugs, I'm told. The precasters must have their ways. He shook his head at her questioning look. "Precasters

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aren't important. What you must know is that there is a universe beyond Testament, filled with people, and they won't let us leave this world. No natives of Testament can enter the Harmony unless they can prove that they're not Altered. I did that. So can you. I've been through the psychological tests. If you help me, then we can leave together. We'll go to Earth eventually, if you want. Darien's the closest world. I have enough saved for passage there for us both."

She moved closer. "The ships go faster than light? How?"

"I don't know how the quickships work. No one on Testament does; we're not allowed to know, and if we leave, we're not allowed back. But in the Harmony the people are like me; I'll be ordinary."

"Not me."

He bit his lip. "If you could be permanently stabilized as Janet Bridger.... Look, I'll find out if it's possible. But really, you have to decide whether or not to trust me. I want to keep you in Dancer's body. Staying yourself. No one else cares." He looked into her eyes, then had to look away because he wasn't honestly certain that anything he was promising her could be made real, and she was watching him with desperate hope. "I'll try," he amended.

"If not, then I'll melt away." She tapped her hand against the side of the bed in a nervous gesture. "Tell me about yourself, Gray Bridger, and about this world."

He did, explaining the precarious balance of memory and self that was natural among the Altered residents of Testament, his own inadequacies, and hers. As he spoke, it seemed that the words leached pain from his situation; from her vantage, his was a mild problem. The sympathy he felt for her grew into respect at her acute and rapid understanding. He imagined that the questions she asked were those he would have wanted answered in a like situation. He no longer thought of her as Dancer, but as Janet, and someone real. She needed him; no one else had ever needed Gray Bridger.

Sometime in the midst of their long, intense discussion Gray had joined her on the narrow bed. They sprawled full length, each clinging to the other through the thin sheet so neither would fall. His voice trailed off. His throat was dry. He glanced out the window wall only to notice with surprise that the sky was dark. The Edgemarket lights and those of the city beyond were all the illumination in the room except for the cold, distant stars and the faint glow of the single one of Testament's three small moons to have risen. They

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were both silent. Gray studied the stars, wondering if he would ever see them any closer, but in a rare tranquil moment, he was content.

"Gray?"

He could barely see her face.

"I'm like a time traveler who can never return home. Are you so certain you want to leave this world? I think you would love it again if you gave yourself a chance. It's your home."

He remembered the pride he'd once felt and could never have here again. "I want to leave," he said simply, finally. "Will you help me? Will you come?"

"Yes." She turned to him. "I want to live."

Her sadness hurt more than his own. A time traveler, adrift in a time machine made of her descendant's vacant body. It was an awful thought.

"Hold me."

He drew her even closer. Through the sheet, her body was voluptuous and young. Once they were in the Harmony, what would happen? When she slipped over the edge into unconsciousness and was once more the hollow creature he'd first seen lying on the bed, what would he do? "God," he whispered, wondering what he'd committed himself to, and who, but a commitment had been made.

She reached out of the covers and her warm fingers slid between the buttons of his shirt to touch his chest. "I never married...before," she said. "I am — I was — a forty-six-year-old spinster. Not quite a virgin, but almost. Working on the slowboat project was my life, and when we had this idea to help preserve the people during transit, I thought, why not? It was simple: harvesting eggs, taking tissue samples. So here I am, the result of my own thoughtlessness. I'm afraid, Gray. I suppose I'm dead a thousand years ago, but I don't want to die." She laughed and stopped only when he kissed her mouth. Her slow fingers unbuttoned his shirt, moving gradually lower with each button. Her movements felt odd, tentative, then he realized she was inexperienced. Of all the women he'd ever known, she was the first without a repertoire of lifetimes of sexual encounters. He eased the covers away from her body, moving slowly, achingly aware of her personal, unique existence. Her flesh touching his wasn't the practiced allure of knowing seduction. An upwelling of tenderness — that she knew less than he — brought tears to his eyes. He reached his arms around to cradle her, spoke her own, true name,

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and made love to her with all the tenderness in his heart.

V. A Generous Offer

"LET ME do the talking," Gray said.

Janet nodded, and he opened the door to the Emigration Office. It was empty. The broad expanse of green and gold tiled floor was dusty. Gray supposed he might almost trace his own footprints from the last few months. He walked to the tall counter, trailed by Janet, and waited. Eventually a scrawny young man in a long blue tunic approached from the other side of a green partition. He recognized Gray — it was obvious from his expression — but he didn't acknowledge it. "Yes?" he asked disdainfully.

"My wife needs an application," Gray said.

The man's gaze shifted over Gray's shoulder, then back. "Women need to present a clean DNA scan." He yawned, "Does she have one?"

Gray shrugged. "She's a singleton, like me. Standard."

The man's expression became conspicuously weary. "Native males only need symptomatic normalcy or a toxic work permit; females need a DNA scan indicating they're Standard human, or else a complete hysterectomy. Full sterilization."

"We'll get it," Gray said after a moment. Robbing a woman of her ability to bear children was a disgusting concept; it ended her line. Would Janet even agree? Then he realized the origin of that attitude. "Can we have the application?"

"From a certified Harmony medic." The man snickered. "Not some native witch doctor." He reached beneath the counter and placed a sheaf of papers between them. "The Harmony doesn't want a pack of Altered brats running loose."

"Okay," Gray said nervously, then amended, "I understand."

The man slipped the paper to him and stepped back, avoiding any contact, then turned away and vanished into the partitioned recesses of his office.

"What should we do?" Janet asked.

He shook his head. The Polite Harmony offices were generally monitored; he'd discovered that the hard way, having made disparaging comments

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about one of his examiners. "Let's go home," he said.

Outside, Martin Penn was waiting. He smiled and bowed, both to Gray and to Janet. "Well," he said. Now that we've run into each other so conveniently, Gray Bridger, perhaps we might talk?"

"I'm sorry, sir. We were leaving," Gray said, upgrading Penn's probable position in the Harmony hierarchy by reason of his quick receipt of the data that Gray was in the Exchange. It would be foolish to consider this a coincidence. He put his arm over Janet's shoulders and moved them both slightly toward the building's exit.

"Do you know what an Ahman is, Gray?" Penn asked softly.

Gray nodded. "Some kind of Jonist scientist-priest." He didn't really understand the relationship between the quasi-religious Jonist hierarchy and the government of the Polite Harmony of Worlds.

Penn smiled. "Some kind." He took the emigration application from Gray's unresisting hands. "I can make this unnecessary. Conversely, I can ban you from the Harmony, despite the earlier approval. Now, do you have time to talk?"

Gray swallowed hard and remembered to bow. "Of course, sir."

"Good." Gray and Janet Bridger followed Penn out of the building and into another down the block, one Gray had never entered. Guards were posted at the outer doors; they watched the two natives with wary attention. Penn directed Gray to the top floor. Gray guessed then that the building was a residence, because the suite Penn led them to was furnished with comfortable chairs and low tables; the single open internal door in the suite led to a bedroom. Penn sat down and waved at them to be seated. Gray did as he was told. Janet sat quietly beside him.

"That precaster was your grandmother," Penn said without preamble.

"Yes, sir."

Penn frowned. "You didn't warn me that she was amusing herself at my expense."

Gray shrugged. "It was none of my business." Anxious not to sound impudent, he added, "You only asked me to bring you inside the dome."

Penn looked at Janet. The dark green shirt and pants she wore suited her and the unaccustomed exertion of the walk had flushed her cheeks and made her eyes shine. She *was* beautiful. Briefly, Penn smiled. "If the marriage was a sham ordered to keep a Bridger prince on Testament, then why are you now

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cooperating with him?"

"My wife is a singleton, like me," Gray answered quickly, without bothering to correct his status as a "prince." "I was unaware of that until we met."

"I don't believe it. If the marriage wasn't meant to trap you here, then you could go the local authorities and register a divorce, instead of dragging her to Emigration." Penn's voice was flat. He looked at Janet. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"It's true."

Penn studied her, but Gray was pleased by Janet's succinct answer. "I don't care if your wife is one of the usual type of native women," Penn said slowly. "I imagine there are medics who can be bribed, or she might agree to be sterilized, although I understand you people breed assiduously and the lack of children is a grave misfortune. None of those efforts will succeed and you'll never leave Testament unless you cooperate with me in getting a real audience with a precaster. The Bridger family is known for the quality of its insights. Suddenly, no one will agree to see an offworlder and I don't want to go through any public channels to enforce my request. Yesterday was as close as I've gotten. You can get me more."

"I have no influence inside Bridger Dome," Gray said. "I'm nothing, a freak."

Penn turned to Janet. "You?"

"I don't know anyone."

"That's unfortunate for Gray's departure plans." Penn stood up. He paced across the room, glanced out a small window, then looked back at them. "You have a different accent from the people here," he told Janet.

"She's from the outlands," Gray quickly said.

Penn ignored him. "You walk differently, too. As if the gravity is wrong. I've seen that on other worlds, not here, where no one travels off-world. Explain."

Janet smiled at Penn while Gray held his breath. "I've been ill," she said quietly, not making the mistake of trying to modify her accent. "I've spent several months in bed."

Penn appeared to weigh her answer, then shook his head. This time he spoke to Gray. "I recognize a mystery when I see one. No matter. It seems innocuous — you're definitely admissible to the Harmony and your claim

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that your wife is asymptomatic for Testament's usual Alteration seems valid. I...guarantee that if I obtain what I want, then so will you. You'll *both* get exit approval, without further bureaucratic paper shuffling, without investigation into your wife's conformity with the usual Harmony criteria. There. A generous offer. Well?"

Gray hesitated, wanting to get away from this imperious man, whom he was unlikely to be able to please. "I'll do my best, sir."

Penn nodded as if Gray's statement was an assent. "But remember, if either or both of you are ever to leave Testament — in fact if you anticipate any pleasant dealings with the Polite Harmony of Worlds — then I expect a meeting with a Bridger precaster."

It was a clear dismissal. Gray speedily stood, followed by Janet. She stared at Martin Penn. "What questions do you have for them?"

Gray would not have dared ask. Martin Penn clasped his hands behind his back and looked at them both. "I want to ask a precaster about God."

VI. Talisman

Mead stared at Janet Bridger. "Your wife?" She sneered as she spoke the word. "Grandmother said you were bringing her here."

"Yes." Gray didn't look at Mead, and tried to pass her, shepherding Janet down the hall to his own room. Mead stepped in the way. Janet hesitated, covering her mouth as she yawned. "Leave us alone, Mead. We're too tired for your games," Gray said, putting a protective arm around Janet.

"You want to play your own?" Mead's laughter was a verbal leer. Ostensibly to Janet, she said, "Gray never has a problem getting partners for sex. Everyone wants to try a man who's untainted by women's memories."

"Why are you talking to her like this?" Gray demanded. Mead grinned. He took Janet's hand to lead her into the back of the house, but Mead didn't move.

"I suppose it works both ways," Mead continued thoughtfully. "I never considered that before. No wonder Grandmother was pleased the alia was Janet Bridger. She's always doted on Gray." Mead was superficially as attractive as Janet. They might almost have been sisters, so strong was the Bridger family likeness they both reflected. To Gray, however, Mead's face was marred by her wicked, knowing eyes.

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"Come on, Janet," he said. "You need to rest."

"He intends to kill you," Mead said. "It will solve all his problems."

"You don't understand him well at all." Janet smiled with an air of authority that would have done credit to a precaster. "But I see why he's so anxious to get away from Testament if all my descendants are like you."

Gray pushed past Mead, bringing Janet with him. "Just leave us alone."

"What's her problem?" Janet said, loud enough for Mead to hear once they were in the hall.

Gray didn't answer until they'd reached his room. "Mead worries that she won't have daughters — no one to remember her life. She's our mother's youngest daughter, so she ought to have been chosen for school in Bridger Dome, but instead I was. She thinks the precasters might know something."

Janet stared up at him without comprehension. "What *are* precasters? Clairvoyants? Some kind of fortune tellers?"

"They're...like my grandmother. They know things. They intuit answers when a question is asked and usually they're right."

He gestured at the open doorway. "Home." The painted walls of his room were covered with pictures of faraway places, mostly drawn by Gray from descriptions he'd overheard, though a few were holoscenes, which were occasionally available on Testament. "That's Darien," he said, pointing to a scene of rolling green hills under a cloudy sky that hung just above his desk.

Janet sat down on his unmade bed, looking at the walls. She smiled with as much condescension as Mead might have shown. "This is the room of a day dreamer."

Gray saw the room anew, as though through her eyes. It had been his sanctuary since childhood. A shelf was bolted onto the foot of his bed. It held notebooks he'd kept during his schooling and knickknacks he'd accumulated: a bit of stone from the Shak Dome taken on a pretend "raid" he and his friends had engineered; a curved knife given him by Kent, his mother's usual and probably Gray's father; a few games, including an old chess set his mother had claimed was made on Earth — only two pieces were missing and their plastic forms had been replaced in carved stone long before the set had come into Gray's possession. The bed was as narrow as Dancer's inside Bridger Dome; this was not a place he'd brought women. Looking at the room, he saw what Janet meant. It was a place to dream about leaving Testament, the separate world of an adolescent. Those dreams no longer seemed so urgent,

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though it hurt to admit it.

"I'm sorry, Gray," Janet said.

He shrugged and smiled. "Why don't you rest? You'll have to sleep sometime." He'd awakened that morning with Janet sitting upright beside him, staring out the window wall. He had studied her profile and known with an instinctive, pleased assurance that she was the same woman. He'd shifted position on the bed to tell her he was awake. When she'd looked at him her eyes were shadowed. "Didn't you sleep at all?" he had asked.

She shook her head. "I was afraid I'd disappear." She'd looked out at Stone Town. "The nights here are long."

Now Janet propped herself against the wall with his pillow. "Are you going to kill me?"

Her smile kept the question light. "Not *you*. Never. I considered killing Dancer before we met, but even then I couldn't do it."

Slowly, she nodded, then leaned over half the bed's length to the shelf and picked up the worn black queen from the chess set. "I know what's so strange about this world — it's too familiar. Because of this memory trick, you're like late twentieth, early-twenty-first-century people set down in a different environment a millennium later. The offies — is that what you call them? — their manners and their pronunciation are less like what I'm used to from...Earth." She shook her head. "I might as well have said, from the past."

He sat beside her on the edge of the bed and put his arm around her back. Her fingers toyed with the little figurine and he covered her hand with his own. "It's all right." Their moods had meshed again. He knew what she needed to hear. "Do you want to stay on Testament?"

She rested her head against his shoulder. "You don't, and I want to be with you." She gave a small, uncertain laugh. "After all, you're my husband."

He hugged her, wondering what to do about Martin Penn. How could he ask his grandmother to meet Penn when her refusal would provide her with what she wanted — his continuing entrapment on Testament. He stroked Janet's arm, up and down in a rhythm older than human memory, a comfort to them both. It was as if he'd captured a soap bubble that could burst and disappear at any time, and he didn't know how to save it. But he wanted to. Janet relaxed against him, then jerked upright as if startled from a doze.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "Stay with me, Gray. I don't want to be alone."

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"I'll call you back," he promised. "I'll wait for you. But probably everything will be fine. You'll rest and wake up."

Janet lay down on the bed and he stretched out beside her, listening to the subdued sounds in the house: muffled footsteps, the wind blowing against the window, a fan turning in the kitchen. Her taut expression faded and he was anxiously reminded of the mindless body he'd seen in Bridger Dome. He forced the image away, but was relieved each time she opened her eyes and smiled at him, still Janet Bridger, pressed against him as she had been the night before. Finally she fell asleep. He touched her cheek, whispered her name like a talisman, and hoped.

VII. Living Memorials

GRAY SHOOK Dancer's body while calling Janet's name over and over, but couldn't rouse her, or anyone. Her face was slack, with occasional brief twitches of life that vanished before manifesting any personality. He felt that he'd betrayed her, and also, unfairly, that he'd been betrayed. Janet was gone.

Outside, the wind whistled as a storm began in Stone Town. Gray sank onto the floor, his back braced against the side of the bed. Dancer's limp arm trailed across his shoulder and he held her hand, pretending she was asleep and might easily be awakened.

Mead opened the door. Gray replaced Dancer's hand at her side and stood. "What do you want?" he asked belligerently.

Mead walked a step inside, her smaller stature not diminishing her sense of menace. She held her hands behind her back as if she was skittish or sly. "I'd like for you to leave. I thought I was finally rid of you, then the old ladies in the dome married you to this." She gestured negligently at Dancer, then studied the prone figure on the bed. "I admit — they surprised me. For years, ever since my memories of Mother first came in, I've thought they were playing games with you, that ultimately they wanted you to leave, but if the precasters are testing you, this is a test that you will not win."

She hadn't come to gloat, Gray saw, though her pity was for herself. "Sorry to disappoint you," he said sarcastically.

She scowled at him. "You were seven when Mother had me; I was her duty child, to keep the main line young, because Irene was already twelve and

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Eris fifteen. A woman shouldn't care about a son so much. I want you off Testament, Gray. I want you gone."

The dark hatred in her expression overwhelmed everything else. "I could kill you," she said. "I've often thought about it, but Grandmother would know and make me pay. They'd let Irene carry on the main line. I bided my time, thinking you'd leave Testament soon, and now I see that I was wrong. They want you here after all — God knows why they value you, a freak. So I'll free us both, Gray, since you didn't have the courage to do it."

"What do you mean?" he asked, but he stepped between Mead and Dancer as if his body understood. She smiled. He contemplated the venomous face, so like that of Janet, or Eris, or even his grandmother. "How can you have all the same memories and be so different from the others?"

Mead snickered. "Singleton, you don't understand much. We don't all remember the same things. Even the precasters. It's what we, individually, have an affinity to reminisce." She brought her hands forward, holding a large kitchen knife like a short sword. The edge was very sharp. "I remember how to butcher people; it hasn't been that long since Shak Dome fell for trying to make a separate compact with the offies, and the First Comers weren't all the glory men they talk about to you children." She smiled at Gray and gestured with her head that he should move out of the way. "I'm doing you a favor. It won't be on your hands and they won't do anything to me for terminating an alia, even a little late."

On the bed Dancer mumbled something unintelligible.

"I won't let you kill her, Mead." Gray wet his lips, mesmerized by the knife.

Mead chuckled, sounding unpleasantly like their grandmother. "Don't be stupid as well as ignorant, Gray. The woman you brought into the house has been dead a thousand years. I am as much Janet Bridger as that useless thing on the bed."

"You're nothing like her! She's still there. Trapped."

Mead met his gaze directly for the first time since she'd come into the room. "Don't you want to leave Testament anymore?"

He knew he should lunge at her and grab the knife. He was larger, though she certainly had memories and innate reactions that would help. Nevertheless, the question stopped him. Did he want to leave Testament? Yes, but not at such a cost. Leaving no longer felt like it was flight from being caged.

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While he considered, Mead dove at him, but with the knife turned away so it didn't stab him. She was a good fighter; Gray's defense was strength and tenacity as he struggled to keep his sister away from Dancer. Mead bit his hand and butted him away with her head when he tried to knock the knife from her hand, then she twisted and spun and suddenly he was on the floor.

"No!" he screamed. "Janet!"

Mead hesitated, balancing the knife in her hand, looking down at Dancer's inert figure, not quite as cold-blooded as he'd thought. He attacked from below, yanking at her legs so she fell. As she plunged awkwardly down, he jumped on her and rammed her head backward into the floor.

She still had the knife and she thrust at him, lacerating his shoulder, but he put pressure on her arm by rolling her onto her side and pressing down on her arm with his knee. She released the knife and he grabbed it.

They looked at each other, both panting, both hurt, and Gray heaved himself off his sister and sat up. She moved hurriedly away from him, toward the foot of the bed. "Get out of here," he gasped, clutching the knife closely against his chest.

"This is my house. You get out. Now. I never want to see you again."

Gray put the knife down and rested his head atop his upraised knees, not watching Mead. He had money. He could easily move into a male dormer, or live with other sisters, or stay with Dancer inside Bridger Dome. It didn't matter. What weighed on him was the crushing of the dream of leaving Testament. He had ruined his last opportunity to be free of the impediment of a wife. He sighed. Martin Penn probably would have stopped him anyway, since Gray had no prospect of convincing the unwilling Bridger precasters to see him. Gingerly, he moved his right arm, feeling pain from the superficial wound Mead had inflicted.

Gray sensed movement at the bed and turned. Mead was standing, holding the old curved knife he'd kept on the shelf. Dancer sat bolt upright, staring at Mead with complete awareness in her expression, but she wasn't Janet Bridger. Gray lurched to his feet. "Give me that knife, Mead!"

Slowly, Mead looked from Dancer to Gray. "Another wife, Brother? You have an entire harem in one body. Never mind this," and she tossed the knife onto the bed. "Stay. It'll be such fun to watch." She sauntered out of the room.

Gray turned to the woman on the bed. His shoulder burned. The woman

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peered into his face, then looked at the wound. "I can tend that," she said in a husky voice, reaching up toward him.

"You're an alia," Gray said.

She nodded hesitantly. "So I gathered. Are you my brother?"

He sank down onto the edge of the bed. "No." He closed his eyes. This woman sounded nothing like Janet; even her face was distinctly different. He didn't want to explain, didn't want conversation, didn't even want to know her. He hoped she would vanish, then guilt made him say, "I'm your husband. Gray Bridger, main line in the thirty-seventh generation from Janet." He looked at her and forced a weak smile.

"Selene, twenty-fifth." He recalled the name as one in a long memorized list of names, the main line of descent from Janet Bridger, youngest daughter to youngest daughter for a thousand years. He knew nothing about her.

Her fingers skimmed his arm. He pulled away and gasped when movement hurt.

"Have your shoulder seen to, Gray Bridger," she said like the many times great-grandmother she was. She lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Nothing changes," she said more softly. He looked away.

His grandmother watched from the door. Outside of Bridger Dome, she looked smaller. Her face was lined and her dark eyes seemed tired. When she noticed his attention, she came inside the room.

"Grandmother," Gray said with false joviality, "meet Selene Bridger. Or perhaps you already know each other."

There was nothing from the woman on the bed. Gray glanced at her. Dancer was vacant once again, sunk into an alia stupor. There were tears in his eyes. Testament. Each person on this world was a living memorial to the dead.

His grandmother quietly turned away and left. Gray didn't move. Very shortly, she returned with warm water and bandages on a kitchen tray. He removed his shirt and she cleaned his cuts. They were silent. The water stung, but Gray didn't object. His mind was on Janet. His life, and all of Testament, was the result of her unthinking actions a thousand years before. She, and others like her, had created the slowboat population and now she sprang up occasionally in one of her descendants, a unique and ultimately horrible form of immortality. He had promised to call her back. Gray looked at the creature called Dancer. The blind eyes were open and the thoughts that

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flickered in the recesses of that mind had nothing to do with this body, except for those few hours he'd shared with the phantom traces of Janet Bridger.

"Gray?" his grandmother said. "What are you thinking?"

"You win, Grandmother," he said. "I'm staying on Testament."

She put the washcloth into the pan. "Why?" she asked, stirring the water with her index finger.

He touched Dancer's closest hand, surprised at its warmth, and then ashamed of that surprise; she wasn't dead. "Sometimes she'll wake up and I should be here. However it happened, she's real. Besides," he looked away, "that offie I brought to you yesterday won't let us leave because you refuse to do a precast for him."

His grandmother smiled into the water, and gathered up the bandages. "You could find a way to please him, if you tried. You're clever, Gray, and usually persistent."

He gaped at her, pieces of a previously unnoticed puzzle coalescing. "Mead was right; you do intend for me to leave. Then what have all these tricks been about?"

She stood and placed the tray on his cluttered desk. "Ahman Martin Penn," she said, as if her voice was a scale weighing the man. "A Jonist from the Academy on Center. Why has he come to Testament?"

"He wants to ask you about God." Gray couldn't restrain a smile, even now.

"Does he? A Jonist priest?" She smiled. "So have others. What's going on out there, that they come to despised Testament to ask Altereds about God? We don't know; no one returns from the Harmony. But old people are patient, Gray. We know that mankind is forgetful, that empires crumble and nothing stays the same. We can make educated guesses — precasts — but we need more data about them. We need scouts."

"I can't return to Testament, either. And if you wanted me to leave, why saddle me with a wife?"

"Obviously because we wanted Dancer to leave with you."

The implications hit him. "That's why you refused to precast for Penn — to put pressure on him. He's important enough to get both of us off-world."

"Without sterilizing Dancer," his grandmother interjected. "That's vital. They won't let you return, nor Dancer, but someday your children will come home to the only place where they'll be normal. They'll know and

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remember the things we need to hear."

He glanced at Dancer. They'd married him to an alia so she could pass the tests as a singleton, or at any rate seem harmless. An alia threatened no one. He was her caretaker, and presumably aside from that, his only role was to father children. "Why didn't you tell me?"

His grandmother touched his cheek. "Most of those who leave are bitter men, too foolish or evil to remain with their families. The Harmony isn't stupid. You had to seem to be one of them. We created a man who would answer their specifications and also ours. We raised your expectations all your childhood, then thwarted them, bent you so far you longed to get away. But Gray, you never broke. You kept your dignity and your honor—I am very proud of you. If we'd told you, the Harmony might have known your application wasn't honest. Penn would never have approached you. I ached, though, each time I saw you, for what we've done."

"You made me a singleton."

She nodded. "So you see, you must leave Testament. You can tell Penn that you've arranged a precasting with me for tomorrow."

"What if he doesn't keep his word to provide our approvals to leave Testament?"

She grinned, looking more like her usual self. "Leave that to me, tomorrow. He won't cheat."

"I've been a puppet!" He rested his head in his hands, with his elbows balanced on his knees. "I've been a fool."

"You're neither, Gray, and you know it."

"And if I refuse to go along with your schemes?"

"You won't do that."

He observed her without answering. She couldn't know for certain. He wasn't as predictable as they were to each other.

Finally, she sighed. "If you stay on Testament, it will be without Dancer."

"I knew there was a threat somewhere."

"You need each other, just as we need you. Her future depends on you. Gray, the time will come out there in the Harmony when you yearn to come home, and they won't let you. Then you two will have each other. She's like all of Testament beside you."

"All right!" He wanted the games over. "You must have a way to make

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Janet — you must have planned for her to be there yesterday. How do you do it?"

"You can't discuss this with her," his grandmother admonished. "She has tests to take and besides, Janet Bridger is not a native of Testament. Probably you should never tell her."

"Grandmother." Gray stood.

"All right. All right."

He watched her place a medical patch on Dancer's throat. "This awakens the deepest memories," she said. "It's not infallible, but there are other ways. Hypnosis, if she's sufficiently alert. It will get easier the more she's out. That persona will become Dancer."

He didn't want details yet; he wanted to see Janet and believe all was well. "Leave me alone with her," he said, refusing to look at his grandmother. He sensed her inspection, then she started to leave the room. "Grandmother," he said.

She stopped.

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, Gray." There were tears in the sound of her voice. "We've hidden with the dead a hundred years, but now it's time for Testament to rise and realize we were only waiting and sleeping. I'm glad yours is the first voice of our dawn; every woman of Testament will remember you." She left the room.

Gray paced. On the narrow bed, Dancer tossed and turned, muttering as she had when he'd first seen her. "Janet?" he said each time she stirred, attempting to call her back to life. Finally, he knelt beside the bed and watched her face. Tics raced across it; her hands trembled unless he held them. Her lips moved. He kissed them. Like a wandering soul come home, she blinked and smiled. "Gray!" she said. He hugged her.

"I dreamt I'd been asleep for a thousand years," she said, "and then you broke the spell and woke me."

"I know that story," he said, smiling, brushing the long hair away from the face of his sleeping beauty, "and I know how it ends." He kissed her once again.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

FORWARD INTO THE PAST

The Year's Best Science Fiction, Tenth Annual, edited by Gardner Dozois, 624 pp., St. Martin's, 1993.

The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, 1370 pp., St. Martin's, 1993.

GARDNER Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction* was a good buy back when there were two or three competing yearly "best SF" collections, and it still is now that Dozois commands the field. I don't think this lack of competition is a good situation (nor does Dozois, to read his introduction), since naturally the collection will be limited by Dozois's tastes. On the other hand, they're educated tastes. This particular volume is very strong at the novella length, and draws from a wider field than some of his mid-eighties editions. Even if you read the SF magazines regularly, you should get this book.

In his introductory survey of the year Dozois talks about the current doldrums in SF publishing, the degree to which SF is dominated by commercial hackwork, the fact that science fiction TV and movies, far from increasing the readership for innovative fiction, instead produce more media-oriented fodder that pressures original work out of bookstores. Yet despite this gloom, Dozois finds room for optimism in the fiction being done by new writers.

For better or worse, every decade or so we've come to expect a revolution in SF. In the '40s it was the Campbell era, in the '50s the rise of *Galaxy* and *F&SF*, in the '60s the New Wave, in the '70s the stunning growth of genre fantasy, in the '80s the Cyberpunks and a new generation of literate SF. Typically the new

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blood enters at the short story length. Dozois's annual almost unintentionally serves as a survey of the new trends and writers. So what does this year's volume say about the generational landscape of SF?

For one thing, it points out a situation that still prevails, though with the death of giants like Isaac Asimov and Fritz Leiber it won't much longer: writers from every generation of SF are still active. Dozois's book contains stories by L. Sprague de Camp, whose first published story appeared in 1937, by Arthur C. Clarke and Frederik Pohl, who published in the '40s and built big reputations in the '50s, by Robert Silverberg and Kate Wilhelm, who did likewise in the '60s, by Joe Haldeman and Ian Watson from the '70s, by '80s stars like Nancy Kress and Connie Willis, and by writers like Ian MacLeod and Greg Egan who have just started to gain momentum.

The older writers all produce solid, if unexciting, work. Sprague de Camp's "The Round-Eyed Barbarians" is a skillfully written alternate history wherein a China that did not turn inward encounters Spanish explorers in eastern North America in the 1500s. Its main goal seems to be to take our European forebears down a peg, but this iconoclasm feels a little belated. Clarke's "The Hammer of God," a story that appeared in *Time* magazine, is a hard science tale of a heroic attempt to keep an asteroid from striking the earth, whose effectiveness is diminished by the large number of killer asteroid stories we've seen over the last two decades.

Pohl, in "Outnumbering the Dead," outshines his contemporaries in a tale of the last days of a mortal man in a world where almost everyone is immortal. Rafiel, a "song and dance man," acts in a musical version of the Oedipus story (complete with hilarious lyrics), marries, fathers a child. Nothing very surprising happens — Pohl does not give us a very thorough picture of this world, and he ignores certain obvious questions such as where the other mortals are and what has Rafiel's relationship been with them. What raises this novella above the ordinary is that in places it reads like a meditation on Pohl's own mortality: Rafiel the popular artist hopes to leave something that will last beyond himself, regretfully but not bitterly letting go of life in the knowledge that many others will live and love after he is gone.

Robert Silverberg, a man who professes no religion but seems to write about religious issues again and again, presents "A Long Night's Vigil

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at the Temple." In it, a priest whose faith has been worn away discovers evidence that the foundation of his religion is a lie. He must decide whether to perpetuate the myth or, at undoubted cost to himself and many sincere believers, preach the truth. For this purpose Silverberg invents a far future religion based on an alien visitation — instead of writing, as he might, about Christianity. The story works, but the made-up church allows Silverberg a safety that Michael Moorcock eschewed in his classic "Behold the Man."

Kate Wilhelm's "Naming the Flowers" is about a genetic sport, a girl who matures from infancy to adulthood in a year. Government agents pursue her and a solitary middle-aged man protects her. It's never explained how these new humans will be a threat to homo sapiens, it's never explained how, if they mature so fast, they won't age and die equally quickly. The heart of the story is the relationship between the man and the strange girl he adopts but cannot truly know.

In some ways Silverberg and Wilhelm write as skillfully as ever. But Silverberg's story, despite its wrestling with large issues of faith vs. fact, suffers from the feeling of slickness that too often undermines his work. Wilhelm's carries more genuine emotional weight, but rests it on a shaky rational structure.

The '70s writers, perhaps merely by the luck of this year's draw, suffer the most in this comparison. Joe Haldeman's "Graves" is a skillful but strangely inconsequential vignette about an incident in the Vietnam war with a literally ghoulish resolution. Steven Utley's novella "The Glowing Cloud" starts very well when competing time travelers descend on Martinique in 1902, just days before a poisonous cloud of gas from the Mount Pelee destroys the town of St. Pierre. But the story's machinations bog down; the characters, initially interesting, become aimless. And Ian Watson's "The Coming of Vertumnus," full of kidnappings, bombings, druggings, complicated scheming among villainous Greens (!), a charismatic oil magnate, and a 500-year-old secret society over the psychological end of individuality in western society, when not murky, is just plain silly.

Many '80s writers — Gibson, Sterling, Kelly, Shepard, Fowler, Robinson, Bear, Shiner, Murphy — staples of earlier volumes, do not appear in this one. Those who do acquit themselves pretty well. Michael Swanwick's complex novella "Griffin's Egg" revisits hard SF, on the moon, with a modern sensibil-

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ity. Like Watson, he presents a fundamental change in human consciousness, but bases it on an SF speculation, and in the process tells a tragic love story.

Connie Willis's Nebula-winning "Even the Queen" crosses romantic comedy with a sly dig at those feminists who interpret all the problems of women as products of patriarchy. Some, according to Willis, are matters of biology.

Nancy Kress, in "The Mountain to Mohammed," looks at the very present-day implications of the genotyping of disease and the breakdown of the medical insurance system. Its characters are servants to the point it makes, but they make it effectively. Tom Maddox's "Gravity's Angel" imbeds a harsh reality about the sexism of real world scientists in general and physicists in particular in an otherwise ordinary tale of a disaster that occurs at the superconducting super collider.

"The Last Cardinal Bird in Tennessee," by Neil Barrett, Jr. (who's been around since the '60s but seems to have discovered new energy in recent years), is one of the strongest (and strangest) pieces in the book. A one-act play, not SF so much as absurdist black humor, it projects a world where pollution and economic collapse have brutally transformed circumstances, but life goes on. It is tellingly funny. In Pat Cadigan's "Naming Names," one of her typically tough-minded heroines, discovering her family owns psychic powers, goes up against her ruthless father in perhaps the most intriguing and inconclusive story in the book. It reads less like a story than an outtake from a novel — one I'd like to see.

Terry Bisson's "Two Guys from the Future" is a deftly funny time travel story, from its opening where two future art thieves garble their attempts at late-20th century slang ("We are here on a missionary position to all mankind") to its resolved-paradox ending. It pokes fun at the New York gallery crowd and at time travel clichés, but ultimately it's a sweet love story. And at last we discover how the Venus de Milo lost her arms.

When we get to writers who established themselves in the late '80s or who are doing so today, we find the most interesting work in the book.

First, there seems to be a renaissance of SF at short lengths from the British Commonwealth. For my money, the star of the anthology is Ian MacLeod, represented here by "Grownups" and "Snodgrass." "Grownups" is a coming of age story set in a world where human sexual

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biology is different than our own. Outwardly the society seems identical to ours, but as the story follows Bobby from his seventh birthday to adulthood it turns subtly wrong until the real horror of the sexual setup is revealed in a truly queasy-making resolution. Like Wilhelm's, the story doesn't make much sense as realistic alternative biology, and given the biological difference it seems unlikely that the resulting society would so resemble our own, but I don't think that matters. MacLeod gets at some real feelings about sex, the way we're ruled by biology, unable to control what happens to our bodies as we age into adulthood. As such it's more surreal metaphor than speculation.

In "Snodgrass" a fifty-year-old John Lennon looks back over his life since he quit a group called the Beatles back in 1963. Most SF about rock stars makes me slightly ill. And too many alternate histories have little to do with what *really* might have happened had things been different. But here's one that is accurate, plausible, and moving. It splits from our history at a moment that actually occurred, when during their first recording session their producer suggested the Beatles record somebody else's song instead of one of their own. Its picture of Lennon's character, poised between arrogance and vulnerability, balances the irony of keeping him alive past the time of his actual death against the irony of the lifetime of evasion he lives. It comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the anti-establishment attitudes of the '60s, but it's ultimately a funny, sad, even tragic portrait of an aging rebel, a man of talent but with an inability to compromise. It redeems Lennon from plaster sainthood while paradoxically showing us how much we lost when he died. Very few alternate histories become stories of character; Dozois is to be commended for making this non-obvious choice.

Australian writer Greg Egan has rapidly developed a reputation for bringing startling ingenuity to cutting edge idea fiction. His "Dust" is a wheels-within-wheels virtual reality story where Egan's penetrating intelligence invigorates what is rapidly becoming a cliché. A man who has been uploaded into a computer wars against his self in the "real" world. But each new understanding of the situation gives way to another. An ingenuity that begins to seem top-heavy as the story progresses is redeemed by an ending that is at once haunting and accounts for the elaborate twists of its development, so that the too-cleverness becomes a part of the story instead of a flaw in it.

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Brad Denton's "The Territory," another alternate history, quite movingly gives us the young Mark Twain and Quantrill's raid on Lawrence, Kansas in 1862. Ian Macdonald's "The Best and the Rest of James Joyce" falls prey to the arbitrariness of many alternate histories. It's full of cleverly realized details, but the Joyce he presents is nowhere near as credibly related to the real Joyce as Denton's Twain or MacLeod's Lennon.

Jonathan Lethem and Lukas Jaeger's "The Elvis National Theater of Okinawa" takes another route to give us a famous historical character. In a gonzo future full of bizarre transformations and apparently little memory of the past, Elvis Presley is discovered once again. This story manages to comment on the pop music industry, on originality vs. cliché, with both poignance and humor.

Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* was one of the best SF novels of 1992. Her novella "Protection," set against the same background, tells of a re-education camp in Kansas set up by the Chinese-style socialist dictatorship that runs America. A streetwise young woman, against her better judgment, gets involved with an older, "political" prisoner who seems helpless to protect himself in the harsh prison world — but by the end of the story it's an open question who is protecting whom. Like McHugh's novel, it deftly demonstrates the connection between politics and survival, offering vivid characters in a real world.

In "By the Mirror of My Mouth," Kathe Koja's idiosyncratic prose style, meant to vivify a story about a suffering wife, a callous husband, and a cloned daughter, only puts me off. I know it works for others, but I keep screaming, "Write in complete sentences!" And finally, Robert Reed's "Birth Day" is a quiet story about ordinary life after AIs evolve as far beyond humans as humans are above microbes; Reed's AIs, with cool benevolence, treat humans to a fantasy night out once a year.

If there is an observable trend here, it may be that the future of SF is the past. Although de Camp wrote finely detailed historically based SF as far back as *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939), it does seem that history increasingly inspires newer writers. We have alternate histories, time travel stories that explore the real past instead of playing paradox games, and stories that in one way or another resuscitate a famous historical character. Stories of this sort play against our knowledge of real history or biography. In Utley's story the entire

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action takes place against our knowledge that Mount Pelee is going to erupt and kill everyone in town. In Lethem and Jaeger's, the discovery of a new Elvis gains significance the more we know about the original Elvis. By comparing what *is* with what might have been, alternate history automatically implies regret, points up the gap between the reach and grasp, the ideal and the actual, youthful expectations and age's disappointment. Even when they come to happy endings a sense of loss pervades these stories. It suggests a science fiction that is in some ways more mature than earlier SF, but also one less visionary, more aware of limitations. Alternate history, in the very act of presenting infinite possibility, ironically suggests a science fiction less confident in the boundless possibilities of the future.

That said, I have to agree with Dozois that, based on the work of McHugh, MacLeod, Lethem and Jaeger, Denton, Egan, MacDonald, and the others in this book of whatever generation, the commercial pressures on science fiction have not bled the life out of the old girl yet.

Human nature being what it is, the first thing a writer is going to do with *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is look himself up. The second thing he's going to do is look up his worst enemy and his best friend and compare their treatment with his. Either the book underrates him, or it's fair (the idea that it might overrate him is harder for the human soul to fathom).

On that basis, this book passes. I'm in it, at enough length to salve my tender ego but not at so much length that I begin to feel vulnerable. My entry contains one error of fact, and a couple of opinions that I disagree with but which are matters for debate. The book treats my enemies and friends certainly not in all cases in the manner and at the length I would treat them, but in ways that are understandable.

To get serious about this, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is the long awaited update of Peter Nicholls's 1979 *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (not related to James Gunn's 1988 *New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*). It's evidence of the continued vitality of both science fiction and this book's compilers that, fourteen years later, the new edition is three quarters again longer than the first, with over 4300 entries vs. the first volume's 2800.

The 1979 volume's editor was Peter Nicholls, with John Clute as his associate; for this one Clute and Nicholls are co-editors, with Brian

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Stableford as contributing editor. Their focus is on genre SF, but they define that term broadly and stretch to bring in items that have affected science fiction though they are not part of it. This produces some odd results. The book includes, for instance, many writers of SF who did not publish in the genre, from Margaret Atwood to Yevgeny Zamiatin, but only those horror or fantasy writers who in the editors' judgment have written or influenced SF. So there is no entry on Clive Barker, but a substantial entry on Stephen King.

The book includes no SF writers who've written only short stories. A writer like Gregory Frost, for instance, who has published three fantasy novels, is omitted even though much of his short fiction is science fiction. Susan Shwartz, who is primarily a fantasy writer, is included on the strength of a collaborative SF book she wrote with S.N. Lewitt, and a fixup novel. Nebula and Hugo award winner Geoffrey Landis, despite his notable short fiction, does not receive an author entry, though his award-winning works are included on appropriate lists.

Space seems to have been apportioned by both the author's importance and the volume of work he's published. Of the writers of the '80s new to this volume, the ones who get the most space are Orson Scott Card, Greg Bear, William Gibson, David Brin, Kim Stanley Robinson. Of the newer writers in Dozois's *Year's Best*, the encyclopedia includes entries on Denton, MacDonald, Egan, and Reed, but none on Koja, MacLeod, McHugh, Lethem, or Jaeger; Koja's longer work has been horror fiction and the others had not published novels by the closing date of the book.

There are separate entries for movies but not for books. I might have done with fewer film entries or entries on mainstream writers only tangentially related to SF for the sake of covering a few more genre writers. On the other hand, the material on films and TV is going to be of undoubted interest and use to many readers, especially considering the growing influence of media SF on the field, and comprises a substantial reference work in itself.

Despite these reservations, it's remarkable how many authors *are* included, from both inside and outside the genre. Just about anyone who has written an SF novel gets an entry. And besides entries on authors, the encyclopedia contains a huge number of entries on themes, magazines, awards, films, directors, comics, illustrators, publishers, and editors. The earlier edition ended in mid-1978, and did not speak of pro-

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jected works. This new edition's official closing date was December 1991, but it contains many references to 1992 publications, and in some instances takes account of works right up to May of 1993, including projected ones.

One of the things to understand is that encyclopedia entries are not simply matters of fact. They *begin with* matters of fact, and no reference that is sloppy with the facts is likely to foster confidence in its opinions. Given the immense amount of material covered and the difficulty of checking, it seems to me the new *Encyclopedia* is remarkably reliable. There is not much biographical information for most authors beyond publishing histories, but there is a wealth of historical and bibliographical information. In paging through this volume I've noticed a few minor errors. Don Delillo's *White Noise*, for instance, is identified as *White Light*. But this volume arrived with eleven pages of corrections (available on request from St. Martin's Press) and clearly the editors' intent is to be accurate as possible and update as necessary. I am told all corrections will be incorporated into a CD-ROM edition, and into future print editions.

Some readers of the 1979 edition objected to its opinionated entries. People complained there was a British or "New Wave" bias, that the compilers went beyond facts to opinions. Others saw this as a virtue. There is no question that three American editors would have produced a different volume, but so would any three different editors. But beyond certain verifiable facts, all encyclopedia entries — even in the most august of tomes — are matters of opinion. So anyone with any opinions about SF will find things to disagree with in this book.

In general it seems to me this edition is a little less willing to go out on a limb. The authors say nice things about everybody — or couch their criticisms in very subtle terms. Also, it's more uniform in its approach — largely because, by their own count, 85% of the new material is written by Nicholls, Clute, and Stableford. John Clute did most of the author entries, Nicholls concentrated on theme essays, and Brian Stableford did some of every sort. As a result the book feels more homogeneous. Anyone familiar with Clute's and Nicholls's previous work is going to recognize a prevailing viewpoint. I'd characterize it as that of a literarily aware, academically educated but not academic, long time reader but non-fan. Clute and Nicholls occupy a kind of interzone

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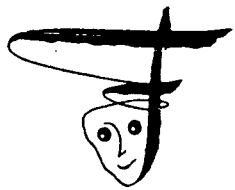
between the academy, fandom, and the general reader. It's not a bad place for such a book to come from.

The 212 theme entries, from Absurdist SF to Women SF Writers, make up a quarter of the book's length. These are substantial essays on most every topic relevant to science fiction. Because of the proportionally narrower authorship, the book doesn't seem as much a conversation between many voices — and occasionally a debate — as did the 1979 edition, or Gunn's 1988 encyclopedia. Those volumes were illustrated with author photos, dust jackets, film stills. This one is not. But this book is superior to either, if perhaps not quite as much fun. Despite its $75 price and whatever quibbles I have raised here, this will be an indispensable book for anyone who teaches SF or who writes about it, and worth the effort for most of us who are just interested.

Open it anywhere, follow the cross referencing and soon you'll find yourself transformed into a particle of consciousness kicked by cultural brownian motion all around the universe of SF; from Greg Bear to Big Dumb Objects to Larry Niven to Eschatology to Lucius Shepard to Gothic SF to Mary Shelley to Sex, on and on until the eyes grow dim and the light fades and a vision of the complex future and the complex past rises up to obscure the sky. With luck, some intuitive grasp of the multiplicity of SF emerges. Cumulatively, the new *Encyclopedia* makes an unassailable case — if such a case still needs to be made — for the importance and vitality of science fiction as a significant cultural enterprise of the 20th century.



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Books To Look For

ORSON SCOTT CARD

Steven Gould, *Jumper* (TOR, Aug. '93, cloth, 320pp, $18.95)

I DON'T know about you, but I've been waiting for Steven Gould's first novel for a long time. And I'm happy to report that Gould blithely jumps into the deep end of Robert Heinlein's pool and not only stays afloat, but splashes around for 320 wonderful pages.

When Davy's father is about to whip him again for the hundredth time, Davy just can't take it anymore. But instead of lashing out at his father, he simply...moves. He finds himself in the smalltown public library that has long served him as a mental refuge. Now it's a physical refuge as well.

How did he get there? He soon learns that he can go anywhere that he can see, and anywhere that he can visualize clearly from memory. It allows him to run away from home. But as a seventeen-year-old with no identification that he can use, Davy finds himself forced into a moral quagmire. He has to steal to live. He has to lie. And yet he wants to be honest and decent.

He also wants to find his mother, who fled long ago; but he loses her as soon as he finds her, and soon is caught up in an attempt to avenge her. He also falls in love with an "older" woman — a college student — and manages to complicate *her* life almost as much as he has complicated his own.

Gould is keenly aware that he is treading on familiar ground, in terms of the sf device of jumping or jaunting, and he acknowledges his debt to other writers quite clearly. But Gould proves once again that in the hands of a wonderful, perceptive writer, there is no such thing as an old idea. What sets *Jumper* apart from other novels that dip back into the well of the masters is that Gould brings his own keen empathy and rigorous intelligence to the story, exploring what the ability to "jump" means in the

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life of this particular young man. It is not the idea but the character of Davy that emerges as the most powerful force in the story.

This novel can work as a young adult novel, because of its seventeen-year-old protagonist, and while Davy's coming of age includes a downright cheerful first-sex experience, I can't think of a secondary-school librarian who wouldn't want to have this book in the library—and I suspect you'll soon be offering it to every bright kid who shows up looking for a great science fiction book.

Having said that, though, I must also say that Gould did not write a book that is only or even particularly for adolescents. Without making a big brouhaha about it, Gould has also fashioned Davy into a true modern hero, and the moral issues he grapples with are important and real. When you have extraordinary abilities, what is it right for you to do with them? There is a point near the end of the book when Davy brings his abusive father, a vicious terrorist, and a self-righteous government agent together on a hidden island, and while the scene is funny, it is also anguished as he confronts the different faces of evil and recognizes how inadequate he is to judge any of them.

Is this the Major Book of the Year? No, it isn't even in the running for that; Gould wasn't trying to write the Great Science Fiction Novel. But this *is* a book that you won't want to miss. It reminded me of why I first came to love science fiction, and yet I didn't have to be twelve again to have a great time reading it. And when you close the book, eminently satisfied with the yarn that Gould has spun, your only disappointment will be that, because this is his first novel, you can't rush out and get another.

Pamela Sargent, *Ruler of the Sky: A Novel of Genghis Khan* (Crown, 1993, cloth, 703pp, $25)

Over the years, I've come to expect a great deal from Pamela Sargent. Her worlds are deeply and thoroughly imagined—she is one of the very few science fiction writers who measures up to the "*Shogun* standard" of world creation. (You remember when you first read *Shogun*: Clavell had created medieval Japan so richly and completely that by the end of the book, you felt as though you could speak Japanese.) Her characters are fascinating and believable, and even the ones you don't like as people are still wonderful to read about. Sargent is also profoundly honest, never bending the societies and characters she writes about to fill any deliberate

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political agenda.

When I saw *Ruler of the Sky* in the bookstore, I was at once delighted and dismayed. Delighted because I find Genghis Khan fascinating and couldn't wait to see what Sargent had done with him; dismayed because this book weighs more than some notebook computers and I didn't have *time*.

Well, I made the time — or, rather, Sargent ripped the time out of my life with both hands and made me like it. She made the brilliant decision to explore Temujin, the boy who grew up to unite his violent and quarrelsome people and lead them to uproot half the nations of the world, from the point of view of the women in his life. Viewed myopically, from a modern feminist perspective, these women would all be victims. But Sargent is not nearsighted and does not have to see the past through the lens of present attitudes. While she does not glamorize the brutality of Mongol life, she makes it clear that even with the cruel limits on women's lives in that society, the women could still be happy, could still wield power, could still live fascinating lives.

Sargent also treats the Mongol culture with respect. Not for a moment does she make me wish I lived in that culture, of course. But she views it from the inside, and judges the characters on their own terms. As you read this novel you become, temporarily, a Mongol, and understand clearly that right and wrong, good and evil, wear different faces here, and what would be a hideous crime among us can sometimes be a simple fact of life, or even something to be proud of. Like the best fiction of the strange, *Ruler of the Sky* destroys prejudice and moral smugness.

There is no need for me to summarize this novel; obviously, it follows the outline of Temujin's life. Nor will I apologize for reviewing a historical novel in a science fiction magazine. Like *Shogun*, *Ruler of the Sky* offers exactly what many of us hope for in the best science fiction — a fully realized alien world in which we can gain a new perspective on what it means to be human. Sargent proves once again that the best science fiction writers, using the most important techniques of science fiction, can write with surpassing excellence in other genres. (And if you just can't stand the thought of reading something that doesn't have a spaceship on the cover, here's a secret: You can just pretend that the horses are spaceships and the yurts are orbiting habitats, and it instantly turns into a really good space opera.)

As for the writing, the 703 pages

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fly by. Suddenly you look up and your family is older and the furniture has been rearranged and your in-laws are visiting and you had no idea because you've been living in steppe and desert, forest and mountain, and for a time you lost track of your old, unreal life.

Morgan Llywelyn, *The Elementals* (TOR, Jun. '93, cloth, 304pp, $21.95)

This novel is really four novellas, each interesting in its own right, all linked together by a common theme and by hints of a common lineage.

The first novella is a flood story; rising waters have drowned the old lands, and a band of rugged survivors, most of them women because their menfolk died defending their ark, must reestablish human life in a new land. A woman named Kesair emerges as the leader, not because she wanted power, but because no one else had the initiative to act when action was required. She has to deal with the envy of the men, and not all her actions are wise. Furthermore, she finds herself hearing the voice of the sea, like an ancient forgotten god who has stirred and forced forgetful humans to respect its power even if they don't know its name.

Deliberately, in the first novella Llywelyn leaves us unsure whether these people are in our future or in our distant past. Her point is that time moves in cycles, and that no matter how powerful we think we are, the earth is stronger yet; and in every story, there is someone who remembers that the elemental powers of earth are alive and irresistibly strong, even if most humans adopt the blithe arrogance of assuming that what we do truly matters, and will last.

The second novella is set on Crete just before the great volcanic eruption that brought down the Minoan culture. The third is in New England at a time when the Indians were still a recent memory. The fourth is in our near future, with the Indians again reclaiming the land.

Never does Llywelyn neglect her storytelling in order to make her point. Each novella is compelling, and as each came to an end I found myself wishing that she had lingered and told more; and yet the headlong rush through time and across the generations is part of the effect she was trying for, and it works.

This is fantasy at its best. The societies and characters are real; the magic does not take over the story, but rather underlies it like a living foundation that every now and then

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shrugs, shaking all that is built upon it. This is the first of Llywelyn's fiction that I have read; I was astonished and faintly embarrassed that somebody this good could have escaped my attention for so long. Perhaps it's because her work is so clearly identified as Celtic, and I thought I knew what Celtic fantasy was all about and didn't need to read more. Well, slap me with a fish, my friends — once again my prejudices have kept me from a fine, fine writer for far too long. Reading *The Elementals* was, for me, a wonderful introduction to Llywelyn's work. Go thou and do likewise.

Eleanor Arnason, *Ring of Swords* (TOR, Aug. '93, cloth, 384pp, $21.95)

Arnason has been around for years. I remember being favorably impressed with her first novel, and she has attracted attention with other works now and then, most especially her recent *A Woman of the Iron People.*

Ring of Swords is space fiction of the first rank. Arnason has created a fascinating alien species, the *hwarhath,* who saved themselves from their males' unrelenting hunger for violence and domination by turning their aggression outward. The sexes no longer live together, and heterosexuality is regarded as a deep perversion. The females rule at home; but on other worlds and in deep space, the hwar males are always in search of a worthy opponent that will fight according to their delicately balanced rules. Unfortunately, while humans match them in aggression, we don't fight fair. And therefore we must be destroyed.

Two characters dominate this novel, both equally fascinating and well-created. Anna is a scientist studying a water-dwelling species that may or may not prove to be sentient; it happens, though, that her research is taking place on the same world where the final negotiations between humans and hwarhath are taking place. Quite against her will she is caught up in the negotiations. She is also brought into the life of the other main character of the novel, a human named Nicholas who, captured long before by the hwarhath, now serves them as an interpreter and adviser. He is, in short, a renegade.

If it is true that whoever you truly understand, you will inevitably love — even if you oppose them — then you will love Anna and Nicholas both, and the hwarhath characters we meet, as well. This is a political novel, caught up in the delicate negotiations between and within

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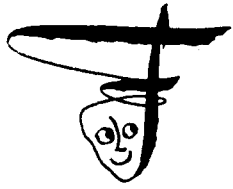
the two rival species; but all is filtered through the personal visions and attitudes of these characters, so that even if you think you don't like political novels, you will like this one. So thoroughly does Arnason create the political and social context that the account of a negotiating session can have more tension and excitement in it than any car chase I've ever seen. Even as the characters struggle to work out their personal loves and fears and ambitions, so also the two species seem to have no common ground, no hope of a solution short of xenocidal war. But the solution, when it comes, is not a cheat, but rather a natural outgrowth of the nature of human and hwarhath alike.

In the end, *Ring of Swords* has become an optimistic yet bittersweet story that lingered with me for days after I finished reading it. The story has the thematic weight and the literary mastery to be in contention as one of the best science fiction novels of the year. After so many years of suffering through endless retreads of the bleak cyberpunk future or the old competent-man storyline, it is a delight to dwell for a time with a vision that seems *sui generis*, taking up whatever science fiction tropes are useful but turning them to new ends. Arnason is one of those splendid writers who is always herself, even as she is genuinely One Of Us.



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The first story Richard Bowes sold to F&SF *("Death and the Deuce" May, 1992) was picked up by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's* Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Sixth Edition. *He has written a number of stories about the same characters, Grierson and Dunn. In addition to appearances in* F&SF, *these characters have also appeared in* Tomorrow Magazine. *They are part of his novel in progress,* Minions of the Moon.

About "Beggar at the Bridge," Richard writes only that "The story is set in a very definite place and time, the East Village in 1975."

A Beggar at the Bridge

By Richard Bowes

I

ONCE THERE was a huge bum with a dirty red beard and red-rimmed eyes who stood all day and every day in front of the truck-rental lot on the northwest corner of Fourth Street and the Bowery. At those who passed from the East Village to the West Village or went the other way, he stuck out a filthy paw and yelled in a hoarse voice, "HEY SUCKER, HOW ABOUT A QUARTER!"

Late mornings I went from the tenement block in the East Village where I lived to the gracious tree-lined street in the West where I worked. Because of a promise I had made, he got a quarter every time. But I didn't pay him much attention.

One morning an old friend called Boris walked west with me on his way

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home from an after-hours club on Avenue A. In a stoned state, my friend sometimes became acutely aware of wonders. Seeing the bum up ahead, he said, "Kevin, they got a giant guarding the bridge! Maybe he'll let us by if we can guess his name."

As I reached the curb, the bum stepped in my path, stuck his hand in my face and bellowed, "HOW ABOUT IT, SUCKER!"

My pal looked at him goggle-eyed and said, "I'm Boris. What do they call you?"

The man replied in an ordinary tone, "Spain."

"No shit. You don't look Spanish."

"I ain't, I'm Irish like your buddy," he gestured my way.

"So, how come they call you Spain?"

Spain paused, looked puzzled for a moment as if there must have been a good reason but he couldn't quite remember it. Then his eyes focused on me again. "HEY SUCKER! GIVE ME A QUARTER."

That I did gladly. Unlike Boris, I didn't need drugs to see magic. The bridge Spain guarded led to a fantastic land of sobriety. A quarter was an easy toll. "You don't ask Boris here for money," I said.

"'Cause he's one of us. BUT YOU'RE A SUCKER AND YOU GOTTA GIVE."

Boris laughed as we walked on. He wore post-hippie high fashion, fine leathers soft as butter and sunglasses that probably cost more than my whole wardrobe. His long black mustache was a work of art. "Hey, at least I can still remember how I got my nickname."

And I laughed remembering. He was Boris as in Karloff. When we met at college in Boston, he had a Frankenstein's-monster impersonation of which he used to say, "I can start and stop doing it almost at will." The nickname hung on when we moved to New York and roomed together on St. Mark's Place for an acid-drenched year or two.

Recently, I had moved back to the old neighborhood and found him making the rounds of clubs and bars dealing coke. Except for a couple of his girlfriends, I was the only one in the city who knew his real name. He once asked me never to tell it. And I won't, though we haven't met in years.

That morning, his day ending as mine began, Boris was like a time capsule. "Remember the junk-connection Mama? It used to be you'd never take anyone along when you went to visit her. Someone told me she's still in business."

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"I'd forgotten about her." And didn't want to be reminded. Certain charms I had been taught seemed to make me invulnerable to the darkness that had almost destroyed me. But until recently, I had been trapped deeper in addiction than Boris was now.

He slid past my reaction. "Remember Bonnie?" he asked. Boris saw everyone. "Bonnie Lewis, the chick who used to live with Jimmy Dace? I met her the other night. Man, she was real interested in seeing you again. There's a bunch of us going to an opening at the Public Theater tonight. Bonnie will be there. Some other good people. Come along."

"I have to see Mr. Dunn after work." We stood in Sheridan Square where we would go our separate ways.

"After the show, there's a party at Phoebe's. Stop by." I nodded and turned. A headless, snuffling shape that seemed to be made out of dirty plastic and old paper came toward us. The smell of piss and garbage choked me. Then I saw an extended hand and recognized a bag lady. Realizing I had no change, I felt for a moment that a sacred promise was at risk.

"Hey, you got to do your good deed," said Boris and gave me a bill which I pressed into the dirt-caked hand. "I'm helping him stay holy," he explained to the woman.

II.

MY VISIT TO Leo Dunn is the main reason I remember that day. In fact, he's the reason I'm here to remember at all. In a bleak season when I was left with nothing but some fatal habits and limited chance of survival I saw his name in a newspaper. Since then I had come first daily, later several times a week to listen to him talk.

At first, I had sat stunned, sideswiped by drugs and booze, my mind blank, my brain pliable. Dunn had molded me, preaching fire and speaking words of comfort for hours on end. His energy seemed without bottom. Though I didn't know it when I walked in, that evening a year and a half later was sort of my graduation.

Mrs. Dunn opened the door, as unfailingly gracious as she must have been to every drunk, druggie and deadbeat who crossed the threshold. Behind her, a late-spring sunset on Madison Avenue turned steeldeep pink and windows gold. Light flowed into the living room, glanced off the glass coffee table, formed an aurora around Leo Dunn. He sat on his couch

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smiling at me, the wizard of sobriety.

"Forgive my not greeting you at the door, Kevin," he said. "I'm tired today." Then he leaned forward, hooked me with the stark-blue eyes and said, "We've done this a hundred times. But you remember the four virtues?"

As in catechism class, where I had once also excelled, the answer popped out, "Temperance, Humility, Patience, Charity."

He nodded. "Temperance allows us to acknowledge our excesses. Humility allows us to subdue our diseased egos. Patience allows us to forgive ourselves for all trespasses real and imagined."

Dunn had dozens of routines. That evening, he ran through all of them: Booze the Silent Partner, The Record Room with its catalog of our failings. My attention wandered. Dunn caught it by moving an ashtray on the coffee table, flashing a silver lighter. "Charity is the most important, Kevin. Not just writing a check but real Charity. Answering the call of others as yours and mine was answered.

"You've noticed, Kevin, that I have the gift of gab. I've always understood immediately what people wanted to hear. When I drank and had money, that insight made me very contemptuous of my fellow man. Always, I was able to see right through everyone else's fraudulence. Not my own, sad to say. That I managed to keep a complete secret from myself. Then one day, I woke up flat on my ass in a flophouse.

"Even later, when I found my way off the street and started trying to help others, my bloated ego still got in the way. I had an impatience with peoples' imperfection. That attitude destroyed all Charity.

"So, I swore to my god that I would give help to whoever came to me, without prejudice or favor, taking from them only what I thought they could afford. Otherwise I wouldn't be available to whoever needed me and I wouldn't be available in the way they needed me.

"My reward had been the joy in doing something I love so much. Sometimes it takes everything I have. Sometimes it takes a strength that doesn't really belong to me. Because of that promise, I feel as though I'm able to borrow strength from all the people like you who have let me help them."

He paused and took a long drink of water. Around us, the life of the household went on. A phone rang and someone answered it. Water ran in the kitchen. A cat's paw darted out from under the couch, then darted

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away.

I told Leo Dunn about the Irish bum called Spain who couldn't remember why. He smiled and said, "When you're down there at the absolute bottom, you can feel it all slip away. Possessions. Life itself. Your identity is more a burden than a right. And at that moment when you need Charity most, it is hardest for people to look at you as a human being. You give him money when he asks?"

"Yes. Because of what you've told me."

"Good. It may be the only thing standing between him and death. Or maybe he just needs a drink. You just do not know. It is not a judgment that is ours to make."

The sun had set behind him. Dunn was in shadow as he told me in a quiet conversational tone, "Alcohol is a vicious, mind-altering drug. It will tell you any lie you want to hear. But I will spoil all its lies for you. You can run from this truth my friend, but once you have seen booze for what it is, you will never believe it again." Those were the first words he had spoken to me when I came to him off the cold winter streets.

"Kevin, you have a good heart," Dunn continued. "I love you and have every faith in you. I have given what I have to give and I believe you will do very well. Just remember your promise. It is the source of enormous strength. Not just for you, but for me as well."

It's great to be praised, to feel yourself in a state of mystical grace. Especially if the means of achieving it seems as easy as this did. "I'll always try to do that," I said really imagining I knew what had just been pledged.

No thunder roll accompanied the oath. No blood had to be offered. A slight chill ran through me on that balmy night but I ignored it.

"Good. Now I'm old and my daughters all assure me I understand nothing, but I can tell that you're dying to get out of here. Go. And don't forget to keep in touch. Call me in a couple of days to tell me how you're doing."

III

AFTER THAT I went back downtown and hooked up with Boris for the opening-night party. "The show was one more incoherent attempt to create the new *Hair*," Sandy, a funny gay guy with a sad face, explained to me. "It's been a few years, but no one

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wants to admit that the sixties are over."

Boris's old lady Gina was there. Tall and zaftig she was up for a part in another show. As Boris had mentioned, Bonnie Lewis was also present. I recalled Bonnie as a round-eyed and long-haired blonde who got taken advantage of. She was now a fierce little silver fox who took no nonsense.

At one point Sandy jumped up to dance and lip-synch with Smokey Robinson singing "Tears of a Clown" on the jukebox. Bonnie, his dearest friend in the world, told me, "Sandy just broke up with his boyfriend and he's doing a lot of coke. Too bad, but he's always got drugs on hand. He's one of Boris's connections."

We all left the party together. At the bar sat boys in suits and narrow ties, girls in backless black dresses and high heels. The timeworn East Village which had once given us refuge was about to do the same for the next generation. At the sight of the fifties finery from the bins of Unique Boutique, Boris reacted like a bull moose whose territory had been violated. "Fucking punks," he yelled. "Go back to Great Neck."

One of the kids cleared his throat and said, "Hippie scum," like he was trying out the phrase. Boris lunged. Sandy and I grabbed him but he broke away. Gina put a headlock on Boris and the four of us hauled him outside and got him home.

In an unnatural place like Manhattan, it's possible to lose touch with time. Sitting one afternoon in Vaselka's Coffee Shop on Second Avenue, eating cold borscht and challah bread I noticed kids buying candy on their last day of school and realized that summer had begun.

That season I saw other people. But Boris and Gina, Bonnie and Sandy were the regulars in my life, a self-contained unit, a box made of people. I was very young, not in years but in the sense of being newly hatched. Waking up sober still thrilled me.

Bonnie helped make my sublet livable with a telephone and bookshelves, with Lou Reed and Mozart records. Bonnie lived with a couple of roommates, the remains of an aborted commune, over on Tompkins Square. We two hung out some nights with Spanish poet friends of hers in a café way to the east where sunflowers grew in the vacant lots amidst tinned-up buildings.

Sandy too invited me out. We went to an opening down in SoHo for a guy who did Donald Ducks on Silk Screens. Gina and Boris came in later. "Tell him about the show you're going to do," Boris said.

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"It's a takeoff on thirties movie musicals," she told me.

"Except it, you know, IS a thirties musical," said Sandy. He and Boris turned away to talk and Gina told me, "I'm worried about Boris. It's not just coke anymore. He's doing a lot of junk."

Boris turned back toward us and said in his Karloff voice, "I'm really not such a bad monster." On impulse, I borrowed a pencil and wrote down Dunn's name and number. Boris stuck it in a back pocket.

The woman who owned the antique store where I worked began spending long weekends in the Hamptons and I understood that it was August. Since we were open Saturdays and Sundays that meant she left me more or less in charge. I liked the feeling.

Mondays and Tuesdays were my days off. One lazy afternoon, I sipped tea amidst sullen painters and toothless Ukrainians at Vaselka's while Boris made calls in one of the huge old wooden telephone booths in back. Returning, he slumped into a seat and remarked, "Summer, a lot of white people go away. Mostly only the serious druggies are left behind. The protective coloration is removed. We stand out. Easy targets for the old narcos."

That moment of quiet despair was my opportunity to insist he call Leo Dunn. But just then Bonnie walked in with a whole bunch of people and the chance passed.

That same week, Bonnie and Sandy both suggested we become roommates. She was quite frank. "We get along. The situation where I am is impossible. I know ways to make a space like yours work better."

"My loft is larger than the Starship *Enterprise* and not nearly as boring," Sandy said.

"I'm still not steady on my feet," I told one. "It's not that I don't think a whole lot of you and about you," I told the other.

Sandy shrugged, said, "It's lonely at the top," and smiled.

"You are a selfish son of a bitch," Bonnie remarked matter-of-factly.

The truth was that I felt invulnerable and liked the sensation. But maybe that's what selfishness is. I could hang around bars or watch Boris and Sandy deal drugs without feeling it touched me, because of the enchanted quarters that I gave Spain each time I passed him.

Mr. Dunn and I talked on the phone. Every couple of weeks, I would drop up and see him. He wasn't feeling well. His wife was worried. "Kevin, he just simply will not eat," she said handing me a milk shake. "Make him

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drink this." He made a face and shook his head. "Leo, the doctor wants you to go in for tests," she told him.

"Not now," he said. "I have a client starting. A very difficult case. He doesn't think he has a problem. I know his family and they persuaded him to see me."

On an overcast day with deadly humidity, a stormy Monday brewing, I awoke feeling tense. Then the phone rang, and Mr. Dunn asked, "Could you come up here?" He sounded tired.

On the street a few minutes later, I barely saw the wolf-faced junkie until he said, "Kevin," and I recognized Boris. In the couple of days since I'd seen him, he had cut off his mustache, cropped and dyed his hair. He shook and had obviously just thrown up. He said, "I need a favor. The narcs have shut everything down."

"Man, I know what you're feeling." In truth, I only dimly remembered. "But what can I do?"

"Mama. I went by and she's still cooking. But she won't do anything for me. Only people she knows. Remember you never wanted anyone along when you copped from Mama? Take this hundred and keep what you want. But get something to keep me going."

The thought of it twisted me inside. "No, Boris."

"Don't look at me disgusted, man! Have I ever asked a favor of you? O.K., you're a prince and I'm a bug unworthy to be crushed under your shoe. Only do something for me before I die!"

Leo Dunn had said about giving Spain money, "It may be the only thing standing between him and death." But I was late and it was going to rain and the thought of buying drugs terrified me for several really good reasons. I said, "I'm on my way to see Dunn. Come uptown and talk to him." I knew it was useless. En extremis all a junkie wants is heroin.

Boris screamed, "YOU THINK YOU GOT LIFE MADE? YOU GOT NOTHING, MOTHER!" Passersby pretended not to notice. I turned away.

Riding the IRT uptown, I felt not empty but dark, like some kind of light inside had been doused. As we pulled out of one stop, my eyes met those of a ragged figure sprawled on a bench. Despite the beard and dirt, the fresh cut over one eye, I recognized his face. It was the one I'd have had if I still drank.

* * *

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IV.

THUNDER ROLLED in New Jersey by the time I got uptown. The lamps were on in the Dunns' living room. Maybe the unfamiliar light made me see him plain. The first time I had been there, brittle winter sun had reflected off the glass table. From out of that brightness, Leo Dunn's eyes had seemed to look into my heart.

Now he sat on his couch and his body was like a rig of wires inside the fine tan suit he wore. His head and his hands, unshrunken, appeared huge. He saw my reaction and said very quietly, "Yes, I took a good long look at myself in the mirror this morning. The doctor wants me in the hospital for tests. But I can't. I have this client. He's difficult, a hit-and-run drunken driver who won't admit he has a problem.

"Remember my telling you I draw strength from all the people who let me help them. Well, now I want to ask more than the usual charity from you, Kevin. You've seen a bit of life and understand things. Will you help me with this young man?"

Stunned by what had happened on my way there, I felt that my life had lost whatever grace and magic it ever contained. Unable to confess that, I just nodded yes.

Dunn gestured at himself and the room. "His first impression will be the most important one." He had me close the curtains partway so that he sat with his pale head dead center in the silver light. Then he told me to turn off the lamp next to him and put on a couple of small ones in the far corners. In that way, while sitting absolutely still, he could dominate the room.

The windows were closed, it was warm and stuffy. "I feel so cold," said Leo Dunn. "You know my appetite is off. When I was in my cups, I'd drink anything. Hair tonic if it was all there was. But as to food I had very discriminating tastes indeed. I ate nothing at all."

He paused for a long moment, then said, "Let me tell you the whole reason I need you here, Kevin. The doctor I'm seeing has his office in the Village. We were there earlier today, my wife and I. On the way back uptown, the taxi driver took us east over to the Bowery. It brought back a lot of memories. There are so many people there that need help."

The first drops hit the windows as Leo Dunn continued, "When we stopped at a light, there was one old black man who I could see needed me very badly. He was prone on the pavement with one hand toward us. I tried

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to get out but I wasn't steady enough. My wife had a little extra money in her purse and we were going to give that to him. But the cabbie didn't understand or didn't want to and he drove on. I can still see that man lying on the sidewalk like a broken promise.

"Way back when I got the better of my own problem, I went back to the Bowery and gave people money and put them up at hotels. I'd spent Christmas Eves down there and I knew it was something that I wanted to devote everything to, all my energy, all my life. I swore because I wanted to make up for all the harm I'd done that I'd never turn away anybody who needed me, that I'd do all that was possible for each person.

"I've never understood quite how I manage to do what I do. My wife and I tried once to count all the people who have been helped by it and we couldn't. That made me more aware than ever that it wasn't me accomplishing this. This ability was not my personal property. I was only an agent, a custodian but I was happy to be that. I'd hate to think I lost it through breaking my promise."

The house phone buzzed, the lobby announced the client. "I asked you up here because in your own way you made a similar pledge," Mr. Dunn told me.

My inadequacy was a gaping pit inside me. If Leo Dunn considered what he had described as breaking an oath then what was my walking away from Boris? Unable to meet his gaze, I turned to watch his wife open the front door.

"I hope you didn't get wet, my friend," said Dunn. The client shook his head. To my eyes he was a sullen, rich kid who badly needed a kick in the ass. I don't suppose he fell in love with me either.

I took a seat where I could watch them both. Mrs. Dunn also stayed in the room. Thunder rolled, rain drove against the windows, lightning flashed behind Leo Dunn's head as the client shook his hand. I saw the kid's eyes widen slightly at the effect.

Then Dunn began to speak, clearly, forcefully. "My friend, you are here against your will, maybe against your better judgment. Even if you never come back to see me again, let me just try to convince you of one thing. Alcohol is a vicious and mind-altering substance that has wrecked much of your life and will wreck the rest if you give it any chance at all."

Dunn said, "Kevin here can testify that booze is a Silent Partner. It's a partner who wants it all." He glanced my way and a pause followed, a long

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pause in which thunder echoed off the skyscrapers.

Leo Dunn put his hands over his face. "My friend," he said, and his voice was muffled, "whatever your motive, you came here to be cured. What you have found is an unworthy agent. I can't help you!" His body convulsed and I realized that he was crying behind his hands. We all heard his sobs. "After seeing that man today and failing to help him, I was afraid that I'd never be able to help anyone again. And I was right, the gift is gone, taken from me."

The client looked appalled. He was not used to having doors slammed in his face. I wonder what my own expression was like. Mrs. Dunn came over and put her arms around her husband. She said, "I think Leo understands now that the doctor is right about his going to the hospital."

V

THAT AFTERNOON I watched Mrs. Dunn check her husband into St. Vincent's in the West Village. By the time he was settled, the rain had stopped and I walked the streets scared and wanting a drink. Leo Dunn thought the loss of his power was all his fault. I knew better. At least part of the responsibility was mine.

The phone rang as I came home needing company for a quiet dinner. When I picked it up, Bonnie screamed, "Where the hell have you been? Hanging out with that turd Boris?" That's when I found out how the rest of my little world had fallen apart.

"Listen Bonnie, I had a bad day," I began.

"Oh poor you! It turns out Boris has dropped dimes on everyone he knows. Sandy! The cops busted him. I went to his place to have lunch and there were police everywhere. Sandy gets arraigned tonight downtown. I've spent hours finding a lawyer, raising bail. The one time I need help, you disappear. You'll come with me to night court, right?"

"Jesus!"

"I take it that means yes."

When she hung up, the phone rang again and it was Gina. "Kevin, where's Boris? Everyone's calling me."

"How would I know?"

"Didn't he go uptown with you to see your friend? Mr. Dunn?"

"Gina, Mr. Dunn isn't . . . he's not feeling real well."

"But Boris came home this afternoon saying he needed money for Mr.

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Dunn. He said you were both going up there. I gave him all the money I had."

"Gina. This is some junkie scam. Boris stole your money to buy drugs."

I did not feel proud when I hung up so as not to hear her crying. At night court, Bonnie and I sat between some pimps in silk suits and a woman who smelled like rancid butter. Bonnie looked around and said, "Kafka was a chump, a hick."

She wanted something, my support, maybe just conversation. None of that was in me. Poor Sandy, when we bailed him out, was hysterical. Since his house was a wreck, we took him to Bonnie's. She dug up some Valium and he quieted down. As I was leaving, Bonnie said, "Kevin, you're still warm to the touch, but you don't care about much, do you?" And I couldn't answer.

The truth was that my invulnerable shield was gone and it was my own fault. I wanted a drink badly and was glad the bars were closed and the streets were clear of dealers. The night was cool. Passing Tompkins Square Park I heard trees whisper in the predawn. Lights shone on a bench where the guy with my face sat all alone watching me.

Here was someone who would know where the after-hours bars were and how to get drugs during a police sweep. My Silent Partner, my addiction, raised a hand to beckon me. He grinned like a maniac when I backed away and hurried home.

VI

THAT NIGHT, what sleep I got was tangled in dreams of journeys through a land of goblins and narcs to a black tower. I awoke full of dread but knowing what had to be done. A quest awaited me and not the kind one gets sent on by the Queen of Elfland. Instead of donning my knightly armor, I shaved, showered and put on running shoes, a hooded sweatshirt and worn jeans. I carried no weapons.

For those who disapprove of the action I am about to describe, I ask you to consider the Orc. Faceless slave of the dark that he is, an Orc dies at a hero's hand and no one mourns. But what if, though now a hero pure and true, you had once run with the Orcs? What if one of the Orcs, whom you have come to recognize as a loathsome creature, was once as close to you as a brother? On a morning when you felt a touch of the old Orc pain

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yourself could you turn away from him?

In this day, poverty, abuse, disease are place-names in the dark realm. And at the dead heart of the kingdom lies addiction, the need that negates life. To redeem Leo Dunn's faith in me, that's where I had to return. It's ironic to think about. But actually setting out was terrifying.

Somehow, as one does on quests, I knew where to go. Though it was a day off, I traced my usual route from East to West. At Fourth and Bowery, two figures awaited me. Spain stood, as Boris had said, like a giant guarding the bridge. "HEY SUCKER, YOUR BUDDY HERE IS HURTING."

Beside him was Boris, shivering in the crisp air. "You do one good deed every day," he told me. "Yesterday, for instance, you warned Gina she was getting ripped off by a junkie. She locked me out. Help me, man, I'm begging you!"

But I was the beggar, more desperate than either of them. Peace of mind was an enchanted land and through my own fault I had lost the way there. Spain and Boris were the instruments of my salvation. "Let's take a little walk," I told my friend and turned back the way I had come.

"HEY, WHERE'S MY QUARTER?" Spain shouted.

Boris, lopping wary as a coyote, asked, "Remember all the times we used to do this?"

Junk is just the high, copping is the habit. Memory guided me east to Avenue B where a faded thirty-foot mural of Satan played guitar and sported a huge erection. As we turned north, a couple of guys impassive in an unmarked Chevy watched us pass. My anxiety began to rise. Like he could read me, Boris said, "Don't fear the narcs. You'll have the stuff in your hand maybe ten seconds, five seconds."

"Nice job you did on Sandy," I told him.

"Where would you have done, man? I got busted last month. Some guy I knew around the bars turned out to be an undercover. I had two choices, jail or names. It used to be the cops were happy you gave them one name. Now you practically have to join the force. Sandy's got the same choices I have, that's all."

What a car frame filled with charred mattress springs sat next to a fire hydrant dribbling water, we turned east again. On that block, lots of stuff had fallen down. But Mama's building stood surrounded by empty lots. I recognized the tower of my dreams. A stray dog sniffed busted trash cans. From the far end of the street, two little kids stared at us.

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While I was away, part of the cement stoop had crumbled, the ground-floor windows had been tinned. The front door was a gaping hole into pitch-dark. Past the light from the street, Boris guided me up the stairs like he had night vision. On the second floor a forty-watt bulb burned. Under it a sign read, "Take light and die," with a skull and crossbones.

The front door of one apartment looked like it had been broken down with an ax. Music came from somewhere not far off. Someone turned it down and listened as we passed. My stomach was tight and there was bile at the back of my throat.

"This next one's a mother," Boris muttered. Sunlight shone down on us. The top steps of that flight were gone. So was part of the wall and a chunk of the hallway. It was like a bite had been taken out of the side of the building. This was new. Boris pulled himself up onto the third floor. "Don't look out," he said.

Of course I did and saw sun hitting broken glass next to a brick path that led through grass and goldenrod to someone's fenced-in garden. The vacant lot was empty. In the garden, tomato plants danced in a breeze.

The fourth floor was dark. Something breathed there, deep hibernating breaths. The music came back on downstairs.

On the fifth floor there was a lighted bulb, jury-rigged from a cable, and a familiar door. "Ten dimes," whispered Boris and handed me the money.

"Watch close," I said. "I'm not doing this again." At the door I cried, "Mama," softly like I used to do.

Nothing. A truck went by in the street outside and the building shook. I turned to Boris and shrugged. Then someone in slippers moved on the other side of the door. I said, "Mama, *por favor*," my Spanish just as bad as ever.

There was a pause and a voice soft as a sigh asked, "You been in jail?"

"*Sí.* Like that. Listen Mama, I need ten."

"Six. For a hundred, six." Boris grimaced but nodded and I slipped the money under the door. When it disappeared I felt the same moment of anticipation and dread I always had. Then there was a rustling sound and I gathered up the six little rolls of aluminum foil.

"*Gracias,* Mama," I said. No reply. "Mama I got a friend here, *un amigo,* Boris." The packages burned cold in my hand. The chill ran up my arms to my heart.

"Mama?" said Boris. "I'll be back, Mama." Dead silence behind the door.

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Copping was the habit; junk was the reward, immediate relief of all my pain and fear. I remembered Leo Dunn as I had last seen him, the best person I ever met, limp and despairing in his hospital bed. It occurred to me that I had earned a share of the spoils. Boris saved me. "Hey," he whispered. "Mine," and took it all away. The cold left my heart and it seemed that I saw Mr. Dunn smile.

"Had to think about it, huh?" Boris said and moved quickly to the stairs.

On the fourth floor, the deep breathing stopped. From the dark a voice, black as sleep said, "You gonna come back once too often."

On three, Boris leaped past the gaping hole to the stairs below. Again I looked out. The lot was no longer empty. A tall, thin man in black leather jeans and vest, a classic rip-off artist watched me scramble past.

Before I could say anything, Boris muttered. "Saw him." His hand went to a back pocket. As we passed under the light bulb, the music faded again and someone listened. Then the street lay before us but the figure in black stood at the front door waiting to take us off. I froze, feeling there was no way this wasn't going to be bad.

Boris, not missing a step, went toward the door. His hand coming out of his back pocket grasped a little semiautomatic. My heart stopped. The guy at the door melted away. "Must have only had a knife," said Boris and put away the pistol. He opened one package and poured junk under his front lip. "Just to hold me until I can do up."

Out in the sunshine we walked away fast. Relief made me babble. "I used to fantasize some Spanish madonna behind the door but from the voice I can't tell. It might be a guy sitting there thinking the whole thing is a huge joke. Anyway, that's the connection. Listen, I've got a feeling Dunn is going to be able to talk to you."

Boris said nothing. Remembering full well the ways of the Orc, I knew I should have been able to hold onto the drugs long enough to talk to Boris about Leo Dunn. An Orc with junk had no more need for anyone else.

At Avenue A he halted. His voice when he spoke was remote, like we had already parted. "Always at the back of my head was that I could get the cure like you. The thing is the cops want me to testify against guys who'll whack me. Do me a favor. Forget my name. Forget you knew me. Goodbye, Kevin." He turned and in seconds was gone.

If there is a god who cares for the likes of us, then what Boris did was between the two of them. And I will gladly answer for myself. My only

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regret is never seeing him again.

VII

MR. DUNN sat up in bed, his right arm attached to bottles and monitoring devices. He still looked weak but he smiled and said, "My client just called asking if he could come and talk to me. A half hour ago I couldn't have found the resources to tell him yes. I was still in the same damn funk I was in yesterday. Then lying here, I suddenly imagined you helping some poor soul in a very bad place. All my useless self-pity lifted. Thank you, Kevin, for being as true as you are."

Ass-backward as my methods may have been, I had managed at least partially to redeem my broken promise. The adrenaline that had carried me evaporated and I sank into a chair. Mr. Dunn asked, "What's wrong?"

I wanted to tell him how scared and alone I had felt on a summer's day when all the wonder disappeared. I wanted to tell him that oaths are hard and dangerous things. But he already knew all that. I managed to say, "If I had acted differently yesterday you might not have gotten sick. A guy I know might be talking to you right now."

There was silence. Then Leo Dunn said, "My sickness came from my own stupid pride. Your friend will get here under his own steam or not at all. The past has no power over the present. And present circumstances are that my client is coming here to see me. I can't handle him alone. Maybe he's not a favorite of yours, but will you stay and talk to him?"

The way to peace of mind lay through dangers worse than dragons. It took a long moment but, beggar that I am, I nodded yes.

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These days, Kit Reed masquerades as suspense writer Kit Craig. Kit Craig's suspense thriller, Gone, *made all the appropriate lists, and has been published in the UK, Japan, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. It will also be an ABC-TV movie of the week. Her second thriller,* Twice Burned, *has just appeared from Little Brown. Kit Reed's writing career continues apace, with a short story collection,* Thief of Lives, *out last fall from the University of Missouri Press.*

She returns to these pages with a wonderfully creepy short story called "The Last Resort."

The Last Resort

By Kit Reed

IT WAS HER FAULT, EVVY Watson supposed in later life, for she would indeed have a later life, light-years beyond her life with Walter. It was her fault for imagining she could make her husband happy. Everything came down the way it did because loving, blue-eyed Evvy with her hopeful air and her sweetly patient smile spent her best efforts trying to please Walter. She thought he was like a puzzle and all she had to do was hit on the right combination to make everything all right again. Wasn't it her wifely duty?

It was hard to be sure about anything.

She was not altogether in touch with her feelings, having come up in the gray fifties, but she was dimly aware that she had certain powers. Once when she was little, her cat got mooshed by a car and she sat on the front steps and pounded her head between her fists and wished, and after that she fell out or something, trance maybe, and when she woke up her mom was home from the vet with the news that the cat was getting better. And when she fell in love with the cutest boy in the class she held her breath until the world

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blurred and when she came back to herself Walter was proposing. Her grown kids said she wasn't gifted, she was willful. Whatever you want, kids. No problem. She had spent her life trying to make her family happy. She was okay with this, she felt good about herself.

But, Walter! Every time she came around a corner in their tidy, quiet house she ran into him: Walter, still trim at his age and, she thought, handsome, although his neck had taken on that irregular, stringy look guys get and his pompadour looked thin in certain lights.

His pompadour! As she faded, he brightened, like a white flower set in a jar of colored ink. The new cologne, the silk shirts in wistfully stylish colors, the pastel topsiders and designer jeans in bleached off-whites — what was he trying to tell her? Walter said he was updating his look, when what he meant was, he was tired of his life.

Evvy could see it in his eyes at parties, when he looked from her in her fading flowered cotton to Clint Murchison's chic third wife, who was a size six and wore sequined tops with cigarette jeans, or when he carted drinks back and forth to Ernie Fielding's foxy popsy, whom he had recently married. Other men put on their sleek women like accessories, preening, while half the time Walter abandoned Evvy on the nearest sofa as soon as they got inside, fanning out so he could pretend he had come alone.

Of course Walter still loved her — thirty years! — he just sort of *wished*, she supposed now. For what? Drawing her flowered skirt over her big knees Evvy trembled, wondering. If she could just find out what her dear Walter wanted and give it to him, she could make him fall in love with her all over again. She would give anything.

But what did he want, really?

More and more often she found him staring out of windows, or looking moodily into mirrors or standing in doorways trying out an attitude she didn't immediately recognize. Wait, he was posturing like a singer on MTV. So she got it; he was practicing youth. If only she could buy it for him, she thought. Dear Walter.

She was smart enough not to point out that it was too late for youth here. Instead she bought him two tickets to a rock concert and didn't ask to go with him. She would have dyed her hair, cut her left hand off, anything, and yet he clumped around the house like Heathcliff, brooding.

It seemed to her that with the kids gone and the college bills paid, they

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ought to be having fun. She missed the kids, who were thriving in their own apartments; it was as if something important she and Walter used to do together was over, but they could take trips if they wanted to, on weekends they could sleep as long as they wanted.

These should be the best years of our lives, she thought, but Walter...Walter languished. The two of them sat down at her pretty table to eat her nice casseroles and he just ate and wouldn't look at her. They ran out of things to say.

It didn't matter what new clothes Evvy put on to please him, she knew she looked the same to him. No matter what Evvy did to herself, or which clothes she put on with which earrings or what kinds of exercises she did, she would always have the same square, stocky body and the same undistinguished, plain but kind and friendly looking face. She was no beauty, but when people looked at her, they smiled. In the old days Walter laughingly called her his Funnyface. No longer. When she reached for him at night he either pretended to be asleep or sighed and threw his leg over her in the same old perfunctory way. She thought: If only I could get to the heart of the problem.

She heard him groan. "Oh Walter, what's the matter?"

"It's nothing," he said, embarrassed. "Just nothing."

But it was.

"Walter," she whispered in the dark. "It's okay. You can tell me."

"It's nothing."

Her voice squeezed out of her, thin and slow as tears. "Oh please, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing's the matter," he said.

Then one night last November he took the garbage out and didn't come back. When the news ended and he still wasn't back she went out looking for him. Walter was behind the garage, standing next to the garbage cans with his shoulders slumped and his head bent. When she approached he kept his back to her; as she tried to touch him he jerked away and made a half-turn to keep her from seeing his face.

Persisting, she moved around front of him and was astonished. "Why Walter," she said, "you're crying."

"No I'm not."

"Just tell me what's the matter."

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His face was working with the effort to explain. "It's nothing, Evvy," he said finally. "Now please go away."

If it was nothing, why was he always playing new, clanky music, and why did he have to buy the new pinstriped Italian cut suit and insist on wearing it to the neighborhood eggnog party when all the other men were in jeans and flannel shirts?

When they went out, why wouldn't he let her walk with him? Catching up with him once in front of a Valentine display in a drugstore window, languishing with tears standing in his eyes, she forced a confrontation. "Okay, Walter. Tell me the truth. Is it something I did?"

"It's nothing you did." He was terribly embarrassed. "It's nothing anybody did."

"Why now," she said mournfully, "when I thought we were doing so well?"

At least this brought a partial acknowledgment. "Nobody can predict these things," Walter said.

"Would you like me to dye my hair? Buy you another suit? Make you a cake?" She would have done anything to please him.

"Just leave me alone," he said.

"If that's what you want, Walter."

He was silent around the house; when he did speak, he was sharp with her. She let it go by because he was, after all, under a strain. What astonished her, then, was that when they went places where there were other people he turned into somebody else — good old Walt, friendly and charming, Mr. Chatterbox at every party; when they went out he was nice even to Evvy. If he was this nice to her at the Murchisons', or in Chicago, what would he be like in New York, Paris, Nassau?

Long distance, she thought, and started sending for travel folders.

Finally she found him in their kitchen — *their kitchen!* — Walter Westfield Watson, whom she married at twenty and thought she knew, for heaven's sake, savagely battering a can of frozen orange juice with the cleaver. Alarmed, she began backing out. But he looked up and saw her and in the subtle, wordless interchange that can link long-married couples, she understood that he was disproportionately angry and he knew that she'd ducked because she was afraid he was going to let her have it with the cleaver.

He put it down with an apologetic look. "It wouldn't open."

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"Let me." Stripping the plastic opener, she cut to the chase. "Okay, Walter, is it me?"

He did not exactly answer. Tears stood in his eyes. "I just want to be happy, *happy.*"

Very well. "Whatever you want," she said.

"What can you do?" He spread his hands like Hamlet, daring her to try and make him happy.

She said grimly, "Anything I have to."

Seed to flowering tree; movement from Point A to Point B.

If she'd had her own credit card, she could have swooped down with the tickets and surprised him — the getaway to paradise, just the two of them. Long nights under sighing palms, the two of them in the sand, rubbing each other with coconut oil, how could he keep from falling back in love with her? But she had to get Walter to co-sign for the tickets.

"St. Martin's!" His expression was a puzzle.

Oh Walter, if only you will let us be happy. "Heaven for a week," she said uncertainly.

"A week!" There was pleasure in his eyes, yes, but there was something else flickering, a mixture of, what was it? Excitement over the tropics and fear of being alone with her? He buried himself in the brochure so she couldn't see what he was thinking.

"A kind of extended honeymoon," she said foolishly; good grief, did he really shudder?

"Oh look," he said too brightly. "There are duplexes and triplexes in this place you've picked out for us. I've got an idea," he went on, building something out of thin air. After a long hesitation he went on as if inspired. "Let's make it a party. Let's see if the Fieldings and the Murchisons want to come with us."

"A party." Her voice sagged. "I thought we could be alone."

He gave her a wry look. "We already *are* alone. Look, sweetheart, if we take one of these triplexes, where we share the rent, we can stay twice as long."

Every line in her body drooped. "Whatever makes you happy."

"I'll call Clint. And Ernie." He was too eager!

"All right." She would have done anything for him. She sighed shakily. "The place will do wonders for us."

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• • •

Which was how she ended up the unsexy sixth member of a sextet on the Island of St. Martin's, Evvy Watson in her dressmaker bathing suit and her one-size-fits-all coverup hurrying to keep up with the rest of them, five youthful-looking middle-agers in bikinis with 360-degree tans, Evvy Watson present but more or less excluded while Walter — Walter was never happier, so at least she had done that for him. Seeing his grin made it all worth it.

Therefore Evvy ended up in the kitchen, sweating over fruit cups and struggling with shellfish while the others talked and laughed under the straw ceiling with their faces flushed with sun and their heads bent in the candlelight, waiting for her to present the food, for which, at least, they thanked her, those stylish, skinny wives said, "Oh Evvy, you are so good at this."

It wasn't fair, but she was a good cook and if it made Walter happy.... It was also what kept her patiently sidelined when the six of them went to the nightclub in town, Evvy staring patiently into her drink in the skull-shaped cup with the floating lotus while Walter whirled with Ernie's popsy, no, his brand-new *wife;* Evvy didn't dance well and it made Walter happy, look at him twirling, laughing....

She would do anything for him.

Still she was puzzled when he came back from the little village on successive days with the Panama hat and the exorbitant leather trench coat and the expensively cut silk suit and a stroboscopic smile so brilliant that she let it go by without remarking.

But in the late afternoon of the fourth day, while Ernie and Clint were taking their siestas, murmuring and giggling with their lithe wives, Walter came back from town with a whir and a flourish, doing a wheelie in front of the triplex on a glittering chrome-and-iridescent-metal motorbike, and something in Evvy snapped.

She put both hands to her face. "Oh Walter, we can't afford it!"

"I want it." Even his eyes glittered. "I *need* it." Her expression drove him to explain. "Please try and understand. It's just...when everybody else is so lucky and you don't have anything..."

She flashed, "YOU HAVE ME."

Then didn't his eyes fill up with those wretched, hateful tears that quench all reason. He gulped. "I just have to have a lot of *things* right now."

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She would have done anything for him — would have done anything even the next afternoon when she came up to a laughing, happy group of strangers at one of those palm-frond bars by the beach to discover Walter at the center of the merriment, witty, newly muscled, attractive Walter in the middle of telling a funny story, brought down like a deer by an arrow at the sight of her. She could have been his homely old mother, telling him to quit playing ball and come inside, Walter, with those wet eyes, regarding her.

Poor Walter looked up from his circle of admirers like a dog discovered in a clandestine feast.

His look was easy to read: *Please just let me do this,* it said. *Please just go away and let me be this person.*

Evvy should have faded away before the others saw but because she loved him, she had to protect her territory, and if she couldn't protect it, at least she had to mark it. What was it that alerted her to something peculiar in the situation? All those girls in their bikinis? No. Something more significant. It was this that lodged between her ribs like an X-acto knife: one of the beach girls in the string bikinis seemed different from all the others. In fact, she looked vaguely familiar; what.... Evvy drew herself up and waited until she was good and sure everyone was looking. "I won't bother you, sweetheart," she said, making it clear Walter was *hers.* "I just came to tell you, it's time for dinner. Seafood croquettes. Your favorite."

He whirled on her with a look like a scythe, designed to sever. Twirled his fingers. "Later."

And still she didn't tumble. Foolish woman; in the strong morning sunlight the next day she could see the joinings of Walter's expensive new hair weave; those pale scars where his newly flattened belly joined the pudenda were the traces left by liposuction and yet she still didn't know. All she knew was that in this light Walter regarded her with a strange new expression, Evvy Watson in the palm frond hat and the dressmaker suit and the rubber beach shoes, Walter Watson's pleasant-looking wife of thirty years anchoring him on their little terrace like a dead weight while in the rest of the triplex Clint and Ernie rolled with their skinny girl-wives and down on the beach the lissome sirens tossed their long, brassy hair and greased their flanks down to and beyond the bikini line.

Race memory made Evvy turn slightly, smiling at him coquettishly over her shoulder. "Nap, Walter?"

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Armed, he would have killed her. *"Don't."*

Pushed to the limit, she turned on him, crying, "What do you want from me?"

His angry face reddened and swelled with unspoken words. Then all the air went out of him and it crumpled. "I just wish you would..."

"Die?" She shouted, "That's what I'd like to do."

"I don't want you to *die*, I just want you to..." He could not bring himself to say it.

Stiffening, growing stronger in her misery, she supplied it. "Disappear?" And held her breath.

His face twisted with shame. God help him, he could not deny it.

"Disappear," she said again, willing it. *Very well.* Fell out; she must have, she thought later. After all, she would do anything to make him happy. When she came back to herself, she wasn't there.

"Evvy, for God's *sake!*" He blinked. "Where are you?" Baffled, he groped like a blind man trying to find something he's lost and can't identify. "Evvy? Evvy?"

First he searched the room for her, and then the little terrace. Then he walked the perimeter and checked the little kitchen. He went around once more, calling, "Evvy? Evvy?" He looked under the bed for her, and in the closet. Then, before he called the Island police, which should have been the next step; before he even roused the others to find out whether they'd seen her, he did the unforgivable. As soon as he made good and sure that Evvy wasn't anywhere, he went to the telephone.

Happy, she thought, because although invisible she was still present. *I would do anything to make you happy.*

She would have, too, after all, she loved him; and she did in a way, even though right there in her presence Walter, *her Walter*, made a Fatal Error.

As soon as he had satisfied himself that Evvy was good and gone, he got on the phone and called up his girlfriend. "Gail, it's me. You'll never guess what's happened." His girlfriend!

There was a little click as everything fell into place, beginning with Walter's glamor makeover and his infernal restlessness and his misery, for which Evvy had been blaming herself all these months. It meshed neatly with all this: the two weeks down here, for instance, and Walter's keeping her at arm's length by turning their tête-à-tête into a house party, letting the other

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two couples provide his excuses and cover for him as he went down to the beach to rendezvous with that weedy little bitch in the bikini, the one she didn't recognize at the bar because she was out of context and practically naked; ALL THIS TIME I THINK WALTER IS HAVING *WELTSCHMERZ* AND ALL HE IS IS, HE'S IN LOVE WITH GAIL FROM THE OFFICE.

Listening to them murmur, the invisible Evvy swelled with the indignity of it, growing huge and terrifying in her anger: she's gone through all this and gotten invisible to make him happy and all he wants is to be alone with Gail from the office?

She didn't reveal herself to him then; she'd been brought up not to make unnecessary trouble. Instead she waited until he'd stretched full-length on the bed, cradling the phone so he could talk more intimately, and then Evvy sprang on the bed, straddling it and standing over him. Startled by the weight with no apparent source, Walter tried to leap up, but she had locked him in place with her ankles.

Then she let him see her: Evvy Watson, with her eyes blazing and her hair flying and her jaws wide as the rusty doors to a blast furnace, jumping UP and *down* on the bed for emphasis, Evvy Watson betrayed and scarifyingly visible:

"You..." (sprong)

"Have..." (bounce)

"Your nerve!" she shouted, springing as beleaguered Walter's hands wavered between his face and his crotch as if he couldn't figure out which most needed protecting.

His mouth was open but only a little string of air came out; his chest was collapsing.

"You said you only wanted to be happy..." she jumped (bonka bonka) "...happy," (bonka bonka: the bed shuddered) "when all you wanted was some..." (sprong) "...STUPID GIRL!"

Beneath her Walter writhed, terrified, and before he could actually identify Evvy she did the most terrifying thing of all.

She disappeared again.

Walter's screams brought the others. The story he told them was not precisely the truth. Grief, he said, that's why he was screaming; something had happened to poor Evaline, explain it, no, he couldn't quite, not really; out

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to sea, he said, at least possibly, he didn't know.

They looked everywhere for her.

They never did find her. At least not exactly. Evvy spread a few clues, here and there, enough to let the Fieldings and the Murchisons, who weren't in on the facts, believe she had indeed walked into the sea. A jacket here on the sand, and over there, an abandoned slipper, gold with sequins because like most large women, she was vain about her dainty feet. And Walter.... He seemed to be getting over the shock, for one thing; watching him gripping the dresser and staring into the mirror, mumbling "nightmare" like a mantra, Evvy saw him perform his own miracle. He managed to convince himself that the whole jumping on the bed business was an hallucination. He was not altogether at ease, however — the way he kept whispering for her as he came into empty rooms, for instance; the way he slept on the floor to keep from having to go back to That Bed.

In time, the other couples went home but Walter stayed behind because the police insisted on a thorough investigation. In some secret, loving part of herself Evvy imagined she and Walter could be alone here together now, just the way she originally intended, but sonofabitching Walter got Gail to stay too — Gail, from the office! Because he had spent the last year or more sneaking around on Evvy, which is to say, dissembling, he was discreet; he met Gail at the hotel instead of bringing her back to the triplex, where he imagined what was left of Evvy was fixed in the penumbra like a fly in amber — if she hadn't disappeared altogether.

Following him from the triplex, Evvy noted with a grim pleasure that Walter kept shooting anxious little looks over his shoulder, as if to make certain he wasn't being followed.

What he hadn't recognized was that the only part of Evvy that had disappeared was the surface. She was very much alive and very much present. What's more, although she still needed to eat and sleep just like other people, her new state had freed her to walk the beaches in the buff if she wanted to; she could even wear a bikini and nobody would make fun of her. Having to sneak food in the night and cover up the traces put her on an enforced diet and all the outdoor activity tightened up her muscles; fascinated to find out what she looked like, she fell at full length in the sand and when she got up was thrilled by the curviness of the impression of her body. Her tan — she knew her tan must be amazing.

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There was another thing: summoning all her powers to disappear for him, Evvy had discovered she had an even greater power; she could reorganize her face if she needed to, turn it green or blue, disassemble and rearrange the features. She could do anything she wanted, she realized. She could go back to the states and reappear and get a real job instead of always having to apologize for being just a housewife. Sneaking a look at her new self while Walter was away with Gail, she realized she could meet cute men if that was what she wanted. She could be happy, Walter. Happy. In time, in time.

But first there was the business of Walter. A part of Evvy would always wish she could have just materialized looking terrific and made him fall back in love with her, but Evvy could never forgive Walter for the things he said about her to Gail once he thought he'd gotten rid of her, or for lying, or worse, for making her think it was existential *angst* or something she did or failed to do that made him so unhappy with her, ALL THAT SELF-BLAME WHEN ALL THE TIME IT WAS ONLY GAIL FROM THE OFFICE.

Still she would have let Walter be, she thought, if he hadn't committed the final indignity, bringing Gail back to the triplex on their last night on St. Martin's to perform some kind of ritual exorcism. They had cloves of garlic, Evvy noted, a hastily constructed cross and some holy water stolen from the cathedral and helpful Gail and Walter in his naiveté imagined they would perform a little ceremony to get rid of Evvy and then cap the climax, as it were, in the very bed where poor Evaline had cried alone on so many nights early in the vacation. They were going to violate the bed where, in her rage, Evvy had thrown off her new invisibility and — jumped — UP — and *down* on him.

Gail said, "Walter, I don't understand."

"Shut up," he said — so early in the relationship! "Just help me do this."

She looked up at him with a look Evvy recognized and brandished the fetish he had given her. "I'd do anything to make you happy."

They were so solemn with their flowers and chicken feet; their expressions were a riot.

Laughing, she watched Walter and Gail go through the foolish ritual; instead of holy water they used rum and, good grief, were those ribbons hanging from the chicken feet? And why was Walter so uneasy? (Booga Booga, she thought, but did not say. Gotcha.)

To add a little spice to things, she blew in his ear and saw him lurch as if she'd hit him. Then, to please him and lull him into a sense of security, Evvy

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waited for them to shout "Begone" for the third time, at which point she did a departure scene, wind through the room, door swinging wide and slamming shut behind her, wailing on a diminishing note to signify departure.

She did a good job. "There," said Walter, washing his hands of her.

"Thank God," said the puzzled Gail, from the office.

"Oh Gail," he said, pulling the girlfriend down on the bed, "Now this, and we can good and well forget her."

Wait a minute. Perched on the headboard, Evvy regarded them. And waited.

Waited until Walter ended on the bottom of the loving tangle, looking up, over Gail's shoulder, laughing at the ceiling.

At which point Evvy let him see her.

"Oh, oh!"

Heedless Gail cried out, "Yes, darling, yes!"

"You don't understand!" he cried, but fear and saliva garbled it which made Gail beat her fists on his shoulders and hold him tighter.

And Evvy? She just grinned at Walter. For the occasion, she had rearranged her features: gums and teeth protruding as if on stalks, nose caved in, cheeks oozing.

"No!" Walter gurgled.

"Yes, yes!" Gail shouted.

Evvy understood she'd pushed Walter to the limit. She had a choice here. She could disappear now and string this out, reappearing just often enough to make him live the rest of his life contorted in fear because he'd never know whether she was watching. Or she could finish him. If she strung it out he would definitely have to behave, but there would be more scenes like this before she brought him into line. Slow torture might be fun in its own way, but she had her new life to begin, and besides, vanquished or not, she was not about to let Walter stay WITH GAIL, FROM THE OFFICE. She — would — not — have — it!

"Gail, from the office," she hissed, through the flaming yellow jaws of death. Then she let her left eye roll down her face just a little. Overcome by the sense of power this brought she let the right one sag into her hideously gaping mouth and to the desperate, strangling Walter's immediate spiritual destruction, she swallowed it. *Take that, Walter.*

By the time Gail noticed there was something the matter with Walter,

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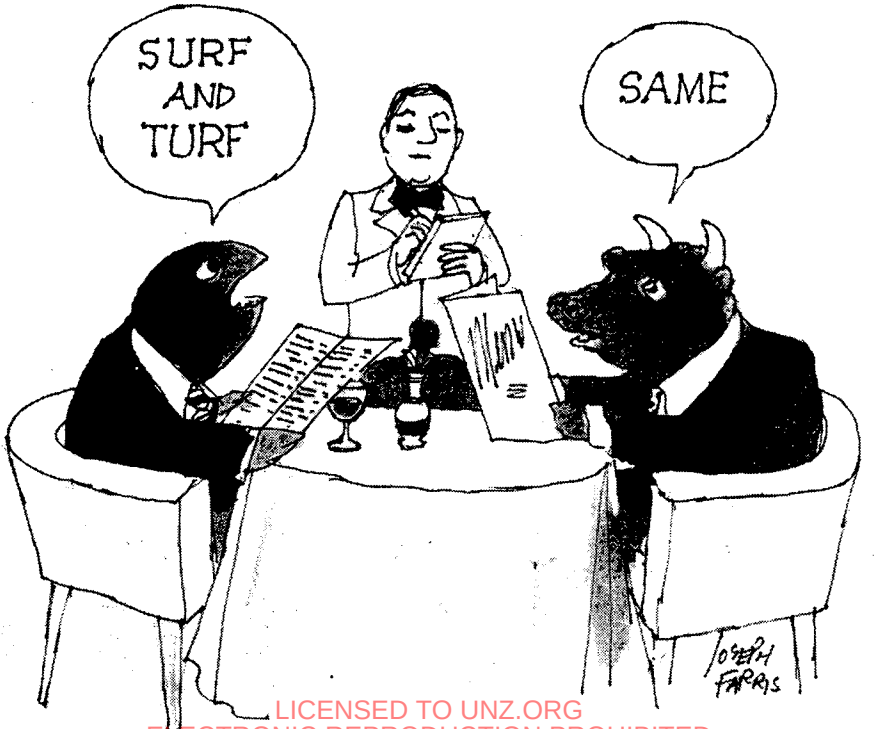
who would be taken off the island some weeks later in restraints and heavily sedated, Evvy was on the other side of the island, explaining her absence to an admiring official. "I was in a spa situation. It was a surprise for my husband."

"But Mrs. Watson," he said, looking at her picture on the passport. "You don't look anything like the picture."

Of course she would take the children to visit Walter in the institution; sitting in his bathrobe in the dayroom like that, socked full of Thorazine and incapable of speech or action, he would have what he wanted after all: enclosed somewhere inside his head and happy at long last, and *happy*.

"In fact, you're perfectly beautiful."

"Oh," Evvy said. "The picture." Evvy looked from the old her on the passport to the handsome, happy reflection in the plate glass. "This place has done wonders for me."



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Now for a special treat. Harlan Ellison wrote this short story, "Susan" as a tribute to his lovely wife. The story was inspired by our cover painting, done by Polish artist, Jacek Jerka. Harlan is writing thirty stories around thirty of Jerka's paintings. They are being published by Morpheus International this fall as Mind Fields. *In 1994, Harlan will return to these pages with an occasional film column, and with another cover story, this one written around the art of James Gurney.*

Susan

By Harlan Ellison

AS SHE HAD DONE EVERY night since they had met, she went in bare feet and a cantaloupe-meat-colored nightshift to the shore of the sea of mist, the verge of the ocean of smothering vapor, the edge of the bewildering haze he called the Brim of Obscurity.

Though they spent all of their daytime together, at night he chose to sleep alone in a lumpy, Volkswagen-shaped bed at the southernmost boundary of the absolutely lovely forest in which their home had been constructed. There at the border between the verdant woods and the Brim of Obscurity that stretched on forever, a sea of fog that roiled and swirled itself into small, murmuring vortexes from which depths one could occasionally hear something like a human voice pleading for absolution (or at least a backscratcher to relieve this awful itch!), he had made his bed and there, with the night-light from his old nursery, and his old vacuum-tube radio that played nothing but big band dance music from the 1920s, and a few favorite books, and a little fresh fruit he had picked on his way from the house to his resting-place, he

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slept peacefully every night. Except for the nightmares, of course.

And as she had done every night for the eight years since they had met, she went barefooted and charmed, down to the edge of the sea of fog to kiss him goodnight. That was their rite.

Before he had even proposed marriage, he explained to her the nature of the problem. Well, the curse, really. Not so much a *problem;* because a problem was easy to reconcile; just trim a little nub off here; just smooth that plane over there; just let this bit dangle here and it will all meet in the center; no, it wasn't barely remotely something that could be called a "problem." It was a curse, and he was open about it from the first.

"My nightmares come to life," he had said.

Which remark thereupon initiated quite a long and detailed conversation between them. It went through all the usual stages of good-natured chiding, disbelief, ridicule, short-lived anger at the possibility he was making fun of her, toying with her, on into another kind of disbelief, argument with recourse to logic and Occam's Razor, grudging acceptance, a brief lapse into incredulity, a return to the barest belief, and finally, with trust, utter acceptance that he was telling her nothing less than the truth. Remarkably (to say the least) his nightmares assumed corporeal shape and stalked the night as he slept, dreaming them up. It wouldn't have been so bad except:

"My nightmares killed and ate my first four wives," he had said. He'd saved that part for the last.

But she married him, nonetheless. And they were extremely happy. It was a terrific liaison for both of them. But just to be on the safe side, because he loved her very much, he took to sleeping in the lumpy Volkswagen bed at the edge of the forest.

And every morning — because he was compelled to rise when the sunlight struck his face, out there in the open — he would trek back to their fine home in the middle of the forest, and he would make her morning tea, and heat and butter a muffin, or possibly pour her a bowl of banana nut crunch cereal (or sometimes a nice bowl of oatmeal with cinnamon or brown sugar sprinkled across the surface), and carry it in to her as she sat up in bed reading or watching the Home Shopping Channel. And for eight years she had been absolutely safe from the nightmares that ripped and rent and savaged everything in sight.

He slept at the Brim of Obscurity, and he was a danger to no one but

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himself. And whatever means he used to protect *himself* from those darktime sojourners, well, it was an armory kept most secret.

That was how they lived, for eight years. And every night she would go barefoot, in her shift, and she would follow the twenty-seven plugged-together extension cords — each one thirty feet long — that led from the house to his night-light; and she would come to him and kiss him goodnight. And they would tell each other how happy they were together, how much every moment together meant to them, and they would kiss goodnight once more, and she would go back to the house. He would lie reading for a time, then go to sleep. And in the night, there at the shore of fog, at the edge of the awful sea of mist, the nightmares would come and scream and tear at themselves. But they never got anywhere near Susan, who was safely in her home.

So as she had done every night since they had met, she followed the extension cords down through the sweet-smelling, wind-cooled hedges and among the whispering, mighty trees to his bed. The light was on; an apple ready to be nibbled sat atop a stack of books awaiting his attention; the intaglio of a tesseract (or possibly a dove on the wing) lay in the center of a perfectly circular depression in his pillow where he had rested his head. But the bed was empty.

She went looking for him, and after a time she found him sitting on the shore of the fog, looking out over the Brim of Obscurity. But she heard him crying long before she saw him. The sound of his deep, heartfelt sobbing led her to him.

And she knelt beside him, and he put his arms around her, and she said, "I see now that I've made you unhappy. I don't know how, but I can see that I've come into your life and made it unpleasant. I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry."

But he shook his head, and continued to shake it, to say no...no, that isn't it...you don't understand.

"I'm so sorry..." she kept saying, because she didn't understand what it meant, his shaking his head like that.

Until, finally, he was able to stop crying long enough to say, "No, that isn't it. You don't understand."

"Then what *are* you crying about?"

He wasn't able to tell her for a while, because just trying to get the words out started him up all over again. But after a while, still holding her, there at

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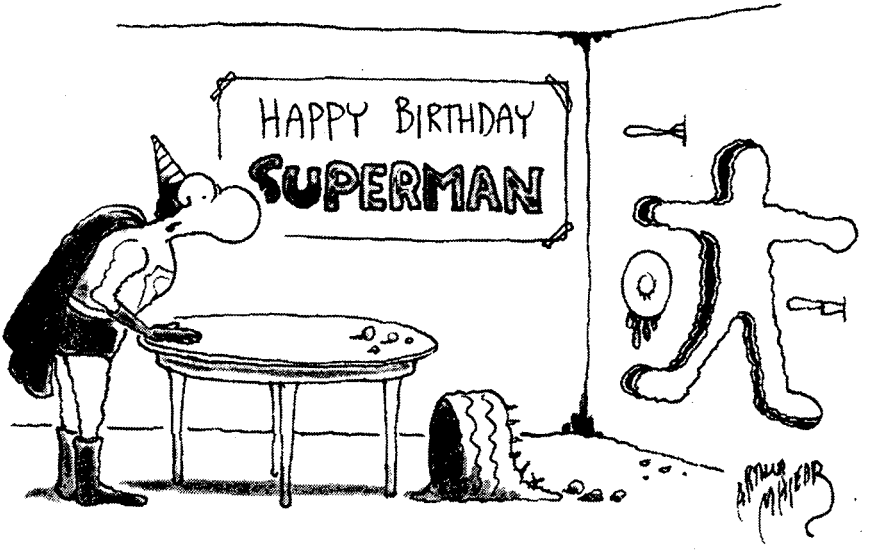
the Brim of Obscurity (which, in an earlier time, had been known as the Rim of Oblivion), he said softly, "I'm crying for the loss of all the years I spent without you, the years before I met you, all the lost years of my life; and I'm crying that there are less years in front of me than all those lost years behind me."

And out in the roiling ocean of misty darkness, they could both hear the sound of roving, demented nightmares whose voices were now, they understood, less filled with rage than with despair.



"Lois!"

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Piano Pony

By Ron Savage

I TRY NOT TO leave my room until they're asleep. Then, like a wary criminal, I sneak down to the study and sit in that special place where I can look at the old pictures, especially the ones on top of the piano, the ones of my sister, Jazella, and me. The pony, too, of course.

When Alfred occasionally does notice, I'll hear this saccharine whisper coming from upstairs: "Dad? Hey, buddy, whatcha doing?"

Now that I'm eighty-six, or eighty-six on Friday — let's not leap into the grave before it's dug, thank you — I can say with some regret that my reptilian Pollyanna son (whom I dearly love) has made an art form out of irritating people. And don't think I'm not aware of what he and that child-wife of his are up to.

They want to put me in the death home.

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An atrophy of will isn't the sort of menace found just in an Auschwitz or a Dachau. There're TV and crafts and socials now. But nothing really changes. An insidious resignedness is everywhere, and the new camps are brutally effective. To go lazy and dumb in a rocker on some unknown porch can bring a drowsy terror. A person can get tangled up even in a summer morning. It's how we join the bewildered and haggard faces of those who have endured this journey before us. And to die with a drool and a half-woven pot holder is no less humiliating than to be herded naked into a shower of soft white gas.

So I look at the piano.

We have separate photographs, Jaz and me.

She is six there, all framed in silver; grinning beneath a wide-brimmed western hat, a regal sweetness to her partly shaded face, the bottom three teeth missing from the smile. But Sister is mounted on the pony like Miss Joan of Arc herself, immortal, courageous, ready to take on death.

Her picture is in front of mine, as if I'm following Jaz to an ancient and not-yet-seen battleground, a couple of innocent warriors. I was four and had platinum hair and a dusty blush of freckles that I'd always try to wash off. In my picture, I'm by myself, but on the same black-and-white pony, clutching the mane with both hands, an expression that is a step shy of horror and tears.

We took these photographs at the state fair in Richmond. It was 1910, I think the year Mother and Father died. After that, things didn't go too well. We lived with a lot of different families, none of them especially pleasant. But they never separated us.

You have to give credit where credit is due.

Tomorrow Alfred and what's-her-name are going to take me to see Jaz. And to be honest, I don't trust them.

"C'mon, Dad, I know you've missed her. You can see the place." My reptilian Pollyanna son pats my arm and gives that once-over glance he uses when he is getting ready to sell someone lawn furniture. "— A gorgeous spot, buddy. Really. Trees and everything."

What's her name nods. "Gorgeous isn't the *word*, Dad." She is on her second Tom Collins and is clopping around the patio in little wooden-sole shoes and a two-piece bathing suit that has less material to it than her underwear. Nice body, though. "It cost us an absolute fortune," his child-wife says.

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Alfred cuts an eye at her. "That's not the point, Margaret. You're forever losing the point." Then he turns to me and smiles with all those straight white teeth I paid for when he was twelve years old and looked like Dracula. Again the voice has become gentle and sugary. "Aunt Jaz should have the best. Right, bud?" His damp fingers creep across my hand. "We want that for my daddy, too. Money isn't the object here."

Uh-huh.

Mr. Surprise.

The three of us are driving to the death home in a Ford Bronco. Margaret is talking to her sister on the car phone, and Alfred hasn't said anything in forty minutes. I'm in the backseat watching the last of the city vanish. An endless lanscape of peanut fields and trees are now tediously slipping by the window.

Sister has been gone for a while, but I can't remember how long — years, though, perhaps twenty. She lived in London until her husband died last month, our contact limited to holiday cards and Christmas phone calls. Then Alfred brought her to Virginia and put her in St. Clare's. Most of the clear memories I have are of her as a kid and a young woman.

Each year, Jaz and I would go to the state fair. And each year the pony would appear, that same black-and-white Shetland. The children were always waiting. Like those fields and trees passing across the tinted glass of Alfred's truck, it seemed to be something with no end. Child after child had been hoisted onto the pony, whose angelic patience continued to fascinate my sister throughout her early life — hundreds of children, thousands of them. They waited to be lifted up. They waited for the softness and warmth of its flesh between their straddled legs. You were suddenly tall and strong. You knew this was the way William S. Hart must have felt. Or Tom Mix. For, once mounted on the pony, we had captured the soul and heart of our heroes. And it intoxicated and terrifed me.

But that was never the case with Jaz. She luxuriated in the mythical as if it were a perfect fit. Nobody I ever met wore the cloak of the heroic more comfortably. And when Mother and Father died, I imprinted on my sister like an orphan duckling, happy merely to tag along, vicariously lingering in what I thought to be a secure and majestic shadow.

We'd invent stories about the pony. Jaz did this, mainly. I was the attentive audience, encouraging her, uninhibitedly stirring the process

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with every question that came to mind. Between us the tale acquired the minutiae and significance of a shared legend. Not that any of it mattered, really. I wanted merely to be close to her. She was the only real family I had. And these riffs of spontaneous fantasy knitted us together. Jaz and I would bring the pony stories out on rainy afternoons and at bedtime; on our long, dreary walks to school or the grocery store. Whenever I'd miss Mother and Father and had the need to have her exclusively to myself, I'd start the whole business up again.

"How old doya think it is?"

"— No age," she'd say, absently shaking aside a few wild strands of wheat-blonde hair that seemed to perpetually hover about her eyes. "It's not like the others, Ben. The pony has always been here. Nothing can make it get old or die."

"You have to be born."

Jaz shrugged her shoulders. And, with a kind of accepting indifference: "Maybe some things just don't have a beginning."

"I wish they'd let us ride it."

There was an odd, flickering change in Sister, a momentary break in composure. Then whatever had been so disturbing quickly dissipated. But her voice seemed remote, without emotion. "The pony's only to sit on, Ben. That's all. It's for taking pictures." And, glancing away, purposely not looking at me: "You don't ride the pony. Ever."

THE DEATH home is white and Victorian. Along the veranda that runs the length of it, pale bodies dressed in gray robes and royal-blue slippers sit in rockers or straight-backed chairs. They wait like a chorus line of wearied zombies. Large birch and willow trees are evenly spaced on an expansive, manicured lawn. Bright yellow slivers of afternoon light filter through the branches and leaves. But much of the sun is blocked by the dense foliage. Shady dark islands patch the ground. A few of the zombies stand motionless in these shadows, leaning on metal walkers, some on canes. Their eyes are vacant. Their faces show no life.

With a dramatic sweeping gesture, Alfred spreads out his arms toward all of it. "Is this marvelous, or what?"

Margaret does an audible little sigh. "— Peaceful, you know?" Her eyes are hidden in mirrored sunglasses. "Isn't everything peaceful, Dad?"

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"They look dead," I say.

Alfred laughs.

Margaret laughs, too.

My reptilian Pollyanna son lost his first wife, Anna, two years back. She was drunk and drove the Porsche into the living room of a house in Norfolk. Anna killed herself and a man who was busy watching "Jeopardy." Then, six months ago, in the middle of middle age, he married what's her name, Margaret. She was twenty-four last May. Alfred is a lot of things, but he knows how to live. You should hear the two of them. That bedroom sounds like a construction site. They go at it at least a couple of times a night, and usually they do a really good one in the morning. (I used to do a really good one in the morning myself.) Alfred and Margaret just want to be alone. Who can blame them. They're probably anxious to hump on the piano. He could put her magnificent butt on the keys and try to play Beethoven.

The child-wife loops her arm around mine, and I can feel her right breast snug against me. "You're such a kidder, Dad. Gosh. Those people aren't actually dead. They're. . . ." She lifts the mirrored sunglasses to her forehead and peers out at the veranda, squinting. ". . . They're just, you know, tired. Or something."

She gently kisses my cheek.

And I have a fantasy —

After I murder Alfred (whom I dearly love), I rip off Margaret's clothes. As we romp naked on the neatly manicured lawn and among the evenly spaced trees, violating each other without mercy, the zombies that line the porch in their rockers and straight-backed chairs slowly begin to move. Heads rise up from silent, frozen chests. Eyes blink away dark webs stuck to once-closed lids. Withered forms creak and stretch. The thaw is gradually completed, and one of them stands; then another, and another.

All the gray robes.

All the royal-blue slippers.

Over the heat and drone of passion, I hear a single pair of hands start to clap. This is followed by a second pair slapping rhythmically together. More of the zombies join in. The porch is filled with the sound of applause. Toothless smiles appear. Hoots and whistles echo across the freshly mowed grounds. The muffled stomp of tiny slippered feet is added to the tribute.

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Margaret and I bow and wave to the audience. Our bodies are wet and flushed. Beams of sunlight shimmer on her glorious breasts. She is wearing only the mirrored sunglasses. I step away, letting her bathe in the frenzied ovation. With equal grace and thoughtfulness, she calls me forward. The zombies go crazy.

But even in fantasy, it is short-lived.

Applause has become scattered, diffused, an abrupt drift into quiet. A thick bunch of clouds clutter the summer sky and spot the ground in black. This strange afternoon gloom brings a crispness to the air. Faces drain of their elation and are now worn and unoccupied. Some return to the rockers and straight-backed chairs. The zombies are staring out beyond the trimmed green of the lawn.

They watch the meadow.

A pony is grazing on the tall grass. It lifts its head and shakes its mane.

She's the littlest nurse I've ever seen, four foot five or six. But her arms have big corded muscles. I can picture her wrestling a zombie, perhaps a couple at a time. She has small pointy white teeth and a noticeable baby-fuzz mustache. Alfred says her name is Beate. The woman has the appearance of a vampire dwarf.

Margaret and Alfred walk off toward the meadow. "— To crush a few daisies," he tells me, winking. (They must have each other every four hours, or they go into withdrawal.) "You and Aunt Jaz need to be alone, Dad. We'll catch up later. O.K., buddy?"

My son doesn't wait for an answer. Lovely Margaret rubs one of her incredible breasts and giggles —

So much for mirrored sunglasses.

The little vampire nurse has my wrist, and the two of us are halfway up the veranda. Next to the steps is a ramp for wheelchairs. She is talking in broken English, an accent that is somewhere between Tarzan and German.

"You strong," Beate says. "Me strong, too."

Our commonality does nothing for me. But the dwarf is right. I've always been an athletic person. All during my twenties and thirties, I was a weight lifter, a three-day-a-week schedule religiously kept. At eighty-six (or practically eighty-six), I can press 115, two sets of two.

As we enter the marble foyer of the death home, I'm sizing up my chances with this strange woman, should worse come to worse, figuring

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she's close to ninety pounds, ninety-five tops.

". . . Vatch floor," the dwarf mumbles. Before I can decipher what that means, I am effortlessly scooped into her arms like a child sculpted out of Styrofoam. "— Floor vet."

Beate grins. Her tiny vampire teeth are framed in vivid cherry lipstick. She carries me over the slick marble foyer and sets me down. The hallway is shiny, lacquered mint green. Neither of us speak. When we reach the end of it, there is a partially opened door.

The dwarf nurse says, "You talk now." And leaving, she flashes me a final smile of white and red, her little hand patting my butt.

I will have to rethink the situation.

Floor-length curtains the color of peach cover two windows that are narrow but the height of the wall. These windows are half-raised, and a mild, warm breeze is billowing out the gauzy material. An afternoon sun goes through the curtains, giving the large and mainly barren room an orange-yellow tint.

Jaz is a silent ghost in the bed, hair like snowy fine strings. Her eyes are closed. Her breathing is shallow, almost invisible. I sit in the metal wheelchair next to the nightstand and just watch. She has on the gray robe and royal-blue slippers. Translucent skin cannot hide the veins. I hold her hand, feel the tissue-paper flesh, the bleached-bone fingers. Then I look up. Sister is staring at me.

It's been twenty years, at least.

A sleepy whisper: ". . .Ben?"

"— Jaz."

"That's you?"

I nod.

The eyes remember. "Oh God. Oh dear God." I can barely hear the words. Skeletal arms extend to me for an embrace. I go to the edge of the bed, and we hold each other. Jaz feels like sticks and air. "Oh Ben," she murmurs, the voice muted against my shoulder. ". . . Precious Ben."

"I'm sorry about Ralph," I say softly, meaning her husband.

Sister gazes at me. "He died."

"Yes, I heard."

"All our friends are dead."

"— Mine, too."

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"It's terrible." Attention seems to float off. Her pale lavender eyes are searching the mostly vacuous room, as if fearful and lost. "W—Where *is* this place?"

"Don't you know?"

She shakes her head. "London. Am I in London?"

"No. Virginia."

The mouth smiles. Her lips are no longer distinguishable, only lined skin around a darkness. "I *do* love Virginia. It's so pretty." Then the smile is gone, and the tone is distant. "I can't walk anymore, Ben. My legs. They don't work good."

"Do you want to sit in the wheelchair?"

Her bone-white fingers slip around my neck, and I take what is left of my sister from the bed, the sticks and the air, and I put her gently in the canvas seat.

Jaz suddenly clenches my shirt-sleeve. Again she looks about the room; now with suspicion. And again her voice is a whisper. "People are dying here all the time, Ben. The new ones come every day. I've never seen so many station wagons and vans. It's like some awful parade. Don't let me die here, all right?"

"I won't," I say. "Don't worry."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

And I mean it. Truly mean it. Death is not bad. But how you get there can be bad.

I'm not sure what I can do.

Sister has my hand. She is studying it, stroking the palm with the tips of her long, glassy nails. ". . . Take me to Richmond, Ben. I want to go find the pony."

"The fair's in September, Jaz. This is June."

"Take me anyway," she says quietly.

"But nobody's there."

"I don't mind."

As I watch her face, somewhere behind this pleading reserve, I can see the six-year-old girl with the western hat, the one that is immortal.

"The place'll be locked," I say, brushing back strands of her thinning hair. It still hovers about the eyes.

"— Not everything." Sister glances toward a far shadowy corner, as

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though she had been called. I'm not sure what has caught her interest. "It was in the room yesterday, Ben. The little pony. I could feel it touch me."

DRIVING FROM the death home, my son hints at how I could spend my Golden Years with Jaz. I tell him not to worry. I've already gone from gold to platinum.

He still can't come right out with it. And I refuse to subdue his guilt.

Tonight Alfred and Margaret hit the bed early. The noise is more deafening than usual, like they're drilling for oil. I wander downstairs and sit next to the piano and stare at the old photographs.

Then I get panicky.

Sister's picture is different. Something has changed. I hold the silver frame, unable to comprehend what I can plainly see. The black-and-white image of the Shetland is fading, a phantom. It's as if Jaz now sits on air.

I put her photo in the pocket of my bathrobe and head to the kitchen, taking the keys to Alfred's Bronco from the hook next to the wall phone.

The last time I drove was in 1963, so this ought to be good. For years, every morning, I'd dress up with a nice brown suit and matching tie and ride to town in my Oldsmobile 88. But after the third accident in less than a month, Alfred sold the car. It's just as well. I couldn't think of anywhere I really needed to go.

He'll probably call the police.

I quietly open the garage door, then climb into the Bronco and start the engine. This turns on the car phone, and it does a loud beep. I almost wet my pants. A flurry of tiny red lights briefly sparkle across the dark surface like miniature fireworks. I rest against the rim of the steering wheel and wait until the blood has stopped its pulsating race.

With only a couple of jerky pulls, the truck is down the driveway — not too shabby, actually; pretty smooth. Shifting the automatic to Drive, I press the gas pedal to the floor, and the tires squeal and spin out street gravel in a small arcing wake.

There isn't much traffic along the highway. But the night has a dewy mist, and the black tar is shiny. Harsh light from an occasional car blurs the road.

Sister's photograph is propped in front of me on the dashboard. The pony has completely disappeared. Her legs are no longer straddling the air.

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Instead, the six-year-old girl who wears the wide-brimmed western hat is falling, frozen in space, the smile replaced with an expression of absolute fright.

Perhaps I am simply a crazy old man, consumed by too many thoughts about death and too much imagination. Perhaps I have gone over the edge and don't know I am drowning in my own hallucinations. Crazy people do that. They think they are normal people in a nightmare. And if I were to call St. Clare's, what would I say to the dwarf nurse with the pointy white teeth and the cherry lipstick? "Hi, this is Ben. Listen, could you check on my sister? A pony might be in her room."

"A vhat?"

"— A killer pony."

"No, no. Ve have *no* pets."

This fantasy immediately scatters.

The phone is ringing in the truck, for real. The sound is like a frenzied little cricket. I pick it up and press the Send button.

A familiar saccharine voice, my favorite reptile: "Dad? Hey, buddy, whatcha doing?"

". . . Getting cigarettes."

There is a pause; then: "C'mon now. You don't smoke."

"Not true, Alfred. I've smoked for years. But I just didn't have the heart to tell you."

"Seriously, Dad. Bring back the truck."

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"I won't hurt your Bronco."

"That isn't the issue." He gets angry. "You really believe I'm worried about some truck? What do I care about trucks, for Christ's sake? You honestly think I'm anxious about a dumb truck?" Another pause; and quietly: ". . . A-Are you O.K.?"

"Will you trust me?"

"This is scary, Dad." His tone breaks with emotion I have not heard from him since he was a child. "I don't understand. If anything should happen to you, I-I'd go nuts."

"Have faith, Alfred."

"— Yeah. Right." More silence. "What am I supposed to do, exactly? Just sit here?"

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"Yes."
"For how long?"
"A couple of hours, maybe."
"Will you at least call me?"
"All right."
". . . Dad?"
"What?"
"Are you aware how much I love you?"
"Thanks, Alfred. I love you, too."
Then I hang up the phone.
Reptiles can be surprising creatures.

I switch off the front beams of the Bronco and enter the long driveway to the death home. The truck is blind and creeps through the delicate mist. I park beneath a large willow tree, in its black shadow, maybe fifty feet from the veranda. Except for a few narrow windows of warm yellow, St. Clare's is a slumbering white animal in the night.

The door to the Victorian abruptly opens. A wide shaft of light cuts through the darkness. Surrounded in this brilliance, the little vampire nurse walks out onto the porch and looks around, glancing here and there. She wears a beige nightgown that has rosebuds on it. The dwarf hesitates at the wheelchair ramp, but finally does an about-face and goes back inside, the light vanishing behind her.

Undoing my white terry-cloth robe, I toss it in the back of the truck, along with the slippers. My pajamas are an umber color and ought to blend nicely with everything. Then I search the ground for some loose dirt. I remember that part from John Wayne's movies. Before heading into battle, the Duke would always put dirt on his face and hands. A good warrior has to be invisible and silent.

I crouch down and run, concealed by the trees and that vapory mist, damp grass cool beneath my bare feet. To be truthful, I haven't felt this sort of excitement in years. Blood darts through my veins with the joyous message of life.

The Duke knew about the joy, too. I pretend he is here, me and old John, and I whisper to him. "What's your professional opinion?"

"Try the simplest things first, Ben,"

"— Maybe the door?"

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"Perfect," he says. White teeth grin out from his commando blackface. "You're a courageous warrior."

"Really, Duke?"

"It's all in the moment, Pilgrim."

The front door is locked.

Jesus.

Again I hear him. "Grace under fire, Ben. Relax. Don't expect the vampire to carry you into Sister's room. What would I do? Think."

There are tiny pebbles on the gray floorboards of the veranda, gravel from the driveway. I gather some up and heave a fistful at a narrow window near the door, one that seems occupied and radiates the soft yellow light. Stones clatter across the glass, a noise that is magnified by the stillness that went before it.

Duke and I hide behind a rocker and wait. We are right next to the door.

"— Not my style, basically," he mutters to me. "But effective. Something Cooper would do."

The dwarf nurse marches to the end of the veranda and looks toward the dark grounds. A foggy webbing covers the trees and the lawn. Then she cautiously walks down the wheelchair ramp and stands in the driveway, her back to the porch.

"Now," he says.

And like things that stalk, we move on the balls of our feet over the foyer and into the blackness of the hallway. I hear the door close, the tiny click of heels on marble. The sound becomes faint, and a second door shuts.

Quiet.

I have a speeding heart, and I can't stop smiling. The invisible warrior has managed to infiltrate the death home. But there is more to do, and the smile goes weak; the fragile victory tumbles.

"Easy, Pilgrim. Get a grip here." Duke also seems to be fading away. "Don't let your fear steal the pleasure. Never let that thief win."

"— Don't leave," I tell him anxiously.

"Enjoy this moment."

"W-What if things go wrong?"

His voice is almost inaudible. "We all have the souls of heroes, Ben."

* * *

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MY HAND is over Sister's mouth. She's afraid at first, but then glances at me, and her eyes fill with tears. In the darkness, I lift the frail, sticks-and-air body and put her in the wheelchair next to the bed. I kiss her cheek, warm from sleep, and the thin white fingers glide silently across my face.

We stop at the end of the hallway. That brightly lit marble foyer looms like hot sun on a parched and endless wasteland. There is no shadow, no place to be safe. The gray rubber wheels of the chair roll without a squeak along the glossy surface, as if wanting to keep our secret. How peculiar we must look! An old man in his pajamas, covered in dirt, guiding his equally ancient, half-dozing sister out the door and down the ramp of the veranda.

The mist has become cottony thick now. After settling Jaz on the front seat of the Bronco and stowing the folded wheelchair in the rear, I turn to open the driver's door. But the dwarf nurse appears in a swirl of damp fog, blocking me.

This is not a perfect world.

Her lips are a vivid cherry red. "Da Strong Man," she says, in her best Tarzan-German accent. "Vhere you t'ink you go, Strong Man?"

With an astounding swiftness, the little vampire clamps those powerful corded arms around my waist, flushing the breath from my lungs. Things get blurry and dim. I immediately decide to forsake John Wayne for Joan Crawford. And in the spirit of a reeling cobra, I sink twenty-five hundred dollars' worth of bridgework into her right ear.

She shrieks, a hand covering the wound. Blood seeps between the fingers. I climb into the Bronco and shut the door and lock it. But there is no way to muffle the screaming. Something is in my mouth. And I spit it into my palm. It's the top rim of her ear, a good quarter-inch piece of cartilage. Not sure what to do, I put it in the ashtray and start the engine.

As the truck slowly lumbers into the fog and toward the gate, I notice a small head bobbing up and down at the window. The dwarf is running beside us in her beige nightgown with the rosebuds. She's shaking her fist and still holding a bloody hand to the side of her face —

Yelling at me in German.

I smile.

Then I flip her the bird.

Fog is suspended across the highway in fraying drifts. Veils of it whirl

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and float as if in a dance. The Bronco's long white beams pierce into this smoky darkness, reflecting and scattering the light.

I am going a flat sixty. And I can't see too well. But the road is mostly empty, and, in another twenty minutes, Jaz and I will be in Richmond.

Sister has the picture on her lap. It remains the same. The six-year-old girl is still in a frozen fall. Though the eyes are shaded by the big western hat, the lower portion of her face is contorted with full, pantomimed terror.

A nervous cricket noise disrupts the silence. The phone's ringing. I try to ignore it, but the cricket is demanding and relentless and won't give us any peace.

Pushing the Send button, I talk into the small microphone hooked on the visor in front of me. " . . . This isn't the best time, Alfred."

"— Dad?"

"What?"

"St. Clare's called."

"I suspected."

"They've notified the police."

"Uh-huh."

"Listen. Did you really bite the woman's ear?"

"It was the dwarf or me, Alfred."

"Aunt Jaz talked to the nurse about this Richmond business. She wanted to get a taxi." He is quiet for a moment; then: "If you bring her back now, I've been assured the charges will be dropped. Even the ear thing."

"Wonderful. And we'll spend the rest of our platinum years in that Victorian death home. No thanks."

"You can stay with us. I swear."

"I'm sorry, Alfred."

Again a pause. His voice has become tense, and he whispers:" . . . Aunt Jaz. She's very sick."

"I know."

"You have to drive her back."

"I'm not doing it for me."

"Dad. She's dying."

I don't say anything.

His words mix with static from the phone. "Can you hear what I'm telling you?"

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"It's Sister's idea, Alfred. *Her* wish. Don't you think somebody ought to pay attention?"

Not too far in the distance, a line of tollbooths stretch the length of the highway, the entrance to Richmond. Luminous colored lights dot the fog. Several of them are blinking a vibrant red and blue. I'm sure it's the police.

"Dad? Are you there?"

"Gotta go."

"— Wait."

"No."

I switch off the phone's power so he can't ring in. The cricket is asleep.

"You didn't mention you were dying," I say to Sister.

She puts a slender, pale-veined hand on my arm. "But you knew."

". . . Yes."

"Take me to the pony, Ben."

Three blue state police cars have parked on the Richmond side of the gray tollbooths. Uniformed officers huddle together, gabbing, joking. The fog is low and wispy here. It mixes with rising steam from the warm black street. I can clearly see them. Shirts and pants are starched and impeccably creased, and the flat brim hats are the sort Marine drill instructors wear.

They notice the Bronco and start to wave us down. It would be foolish to stop. I check Jaz's seat belt as we shoot through one of the Exact Change booths at an even sixty, the black-and-white-striped guard post snapping in two and bouncing away from the hood of the truck.

Sister squeals and pats my arm.

She's having a good time.

I glance in the mirror. The officers run to their cars and pull out in single file, the red-and-blue lights rotating, the sirens doing a curt *wooop!, wooop!* noise.

It's like TV.

We turn onto Laburnum Avenue, skidding a bit, mostly the back tires. I feel my heart beat hard in my chest and ears. Large fluorescent lamps perch high above the empty sidewalks and street like cold, watchful eyes. The truck is up to seventy-five. Now the other vehicles swerve into view, one followed by the next, a precision that has its own peculiar beauty.

The exposition grounds are a minute or two from us, just off the Richmond-Henrico Turnpike. Sister and I lived near there, before shopping

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malls and housing develpments. It was all trees and meadows then. But you don't forget.

"Go down here," Jaz says, pointing to a narrow one-way road on the left.

"That's not how you get to the fair."

"*Go* down here," she says again, very sure of things.

"This isn't right."

"Please, Ben."

"O.K. But you'll have us lost."

"— And don't use the lights."

The tiny street is a bumpy cobblestone. Dark brick row houses are on either side of us. I have to drive slow. Sister moves around and peers over the seat toward the rear window. A wall of dense white fog is forming behind us. The noise of the sirens cannot be heard. Yet, in front of me, the night has no trace of mist or clouds. A round summer moon hangs eye level in an exquisite black and starry night. I am afraid. It's as if we have driven into some mysterious and protective embrace.

"Do you remember, Ben?"

I shake my head. The fear is intense. "No. *No*, I don't. We shouldn't be —"

Sister interrupts. "It's where the pony lives."

"Those are stories, I tell her. But I am scared that they are not stories at all.

"We made them true, Ben."

"— Just something to pass the time."

"Every night we prayed," she says, her eyes not leaving mine. "How many prayers did you and I do, Ben?"

Then I stop the truck.

There is a cemetery on the other side of the cobblestone street. Over the gate is a black wrought-iron archway. Two angels are at its peak, with heads bowed and hands folded. Tall poplar trees and aging oaks are like sentinels, guarding silent tombs.

It is where Mother and Father are buried. Sister was six and I was four when they died. We had gone into their room and found them in bed, holding each other. Jaz had called to them, but they neither spoke nor moved. The white sheets were wet and stained a bright red. In my father's lifeless hand was a pistol.

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No one ever told us why.

And now, as I push Sister in the wheelchair toward the wrought-iron gate and the two angels, I realize this horrible bleak question has never left me. It only pretends to go. But it is in the shadows, whispering. The question can offer no answer, yet its profound and bewildering presence is reason enough to keep it close.

Trees are heavy with summer leaves, and shade the tombstones from the moonlight. At the far corner of the yard, I can see an enormous and familiar face. And the fear is there again like icy little knives.

"We thought they lived in the fun house," Jaz is saying, her thin, long fingers reaching behind to touch me. "— That one at the fair."

The huge face is two-dimensional and flat. It is partly hidden by the branches and foliage.

"... Our pony lived there, too. Remember, Ben? The pony stayed in the fun house with Mama and Papa."

Large blue eyes stare out at us from a painted white face. The nose is round and starkly red. Wild orange hair curls away from pointed ears. Moonbeams and darkness streak it, play upon it.

"You wanted to know where they put the fun house when the fair was gone," Sister says, and I feel the grasp of her bony fingers tighten about my hand. "And we decided that the fun house ought to be kept in the cemetery, near Mama and Papa. We made it real, Ben. Don't you remember how real we made everything?"

A narrow ramp bridges the weedy lawn of the graveyard and rests in the clown's wide oval mouth. Its grinning lips are a cherry color like the lipstick of the dwarf nurse. A soft, clear glow emanates from the oval cavity and cuts into the night. From within, there is the faint *clip-clop* sound of tiny hooves on wood.

The Shetland looks at us, framed in that immense red smile, the mane wintry and luminous. It seems gentle, smaller than my memory of it.

Ever so carefully, the pony ambles down the ramp and stands patiently in front of Sister's wheelchair. Then the black nose nuzzles into her lap.

And she says, "Put me on it, Ben."

"Are you sure?"

"... Yes."

I lift up the paper-light body from the chair and place Jaz on the pony. The skeletal arms wrap about its neck, her cheek against the fluff of its

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mane.

"Come with me, Ben."

"— No. I love you. But I won't do that."

"We can be together, all of us."

"I'm sorry," I say, and kiss her. "We'll be together soon enough."

As I watch the Shetland take Sister into the grinning mouth of the clown, Mother and Father are again in their bed, those terrifying red sheets. The picture of them can't go away. And my question is a screaming child.

Jaz and the Shetland vanish into that gauzy, lustrous softness.

Even when Sister married and lived in another country, she was a part of me. Our souls have always been huddled in some undefinable orbit.

To finally be without her is frightening.

But I am an invincible warrior, a commando. On Friday I will be eighty-six. I can press 115, two sets of two. And it is time for black face and jungle warfare. Unlike my parents, I won't be easy prey. Death will have trouble with me.

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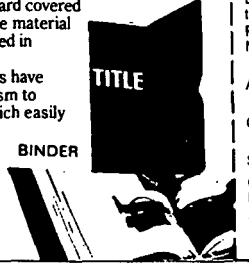

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

ALIENS WE CAN KNOW

ON COLUMBUS Day of 1992, five hundred years after the last man to discover America, the USA began its full-bore program of radio listening for other civilizations — the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, SETI.

It was a big, media-savvy kickoff, made possible by adroit renaming, under Senate review, from SETI to a title invoking microwave research: Serious Science, see? That pried forth the necessary million or so dollars a year. The big van filled with electronics began evesdropping at such speed that the program outdistanced all previous SETI observations in its first hour on the air. It was a satisfying moment, the culmination of thirty years of concerted, orderly dreaming.

When I visited the SETI office at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in June, 1993, I was very impressed with the electronics and computers, allowing the astronomers to direct the antenna cupped skyward at Goldstone, California. That big dish was baking in desert heat, but the astronomers could study the microwave sky during office hours, from air conditioned comfort. Comfortable lodgings for the new Columbuses.

Don't expect results immediately. Two searches proceed in parallel, one peering intensely at nearby stars, the other methodically eyeing the whole sky. Both will take at least seven years to make a solid search, and then they can both expand the range of frequency, bandwidth, listening time, etc. for deeper scrutiny. I wish them well.

Still... Though I have known some of the principals in the SETI community for decades, I have always felt a bit displaced from their views. I am uneasy with the cast of our radio-listening ideas, because they

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are so human grounded.

Of course, in a deep sense they could not be otherwise. But many of our assumptions about aliens reflect our own recent development. I have a slide of a recently studied nebula in the Milky Way which illustrates this nicely. When I show it to audiences, I ask them what they see.

Within ten seconds, most perceive a human face, complete with a Renaissance-style headband. After more study, they see two faces. Of course nobody in the nebula is producing this to communicate with us; our eyes, intimately linked to our brains, pull the images out of a natural swath of gas and dust. We impose ourselves on the universe.

I do subscribe to the basic case for SETI, which envisions a plausible set of linked events. Life as we know it conjures up from carbon and water, abundant in the universe. Quite a few planets probably have these chemicals warmed by a nearby sun.

Life here blossomed in about half a billion years, perhaps less, suggesting that it's not a difficult trick for randomly colliding chemicals to do. Laboratory reproductions of such early conditions — a cocktail of ammonia, methane, water, molecular hydrogen, laced by ultraviolet sunlight and zapped by lightning — readily yield amino acids, the precursor molecules for life as we know it.

After a fast start, life took a puzzlingly long time to build up interesting structure. 'Modern'-type multicellular organisms with complex structures took about a billion years to appear. Apparently there is something difficult about the first halting steps upward. On some worlds it may simply never happen. If the time varied by merely a factor of three, life here would be still quite primitive.

Brains came along a full billion years after that, then land life a further two hundred million years, and finally — us. In the fossil record there is only one category that constantly improved: brain size, implying that it has consistent survival advantage.

Will aliens evolve similarly? Our brains are ramshackle layers of complex cellular units, slapped together to give momentary advantage. Much of our mental processing is buried, unconscious, and hard to manage (emotions, for example). Evolution's twists and turns won't be the same elsewhere, so other minds will be vastly different. Will they have our astonishing capacity to chart the origin of the universe, frame a sonnet, sing and laugh and dare?

SETI must assume that they do share at least some of our habits of mind. SETI is not a science in itself,

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though it uses the methods and conclusions of science to frame its arguments. Instead, it is an agenda of second-hand exploration.

Science predicts, then checks; exploration ventures, expecting surprises. Many explorers had reasons that seem fanciful to us today. Ponce de Leon sought immortality in Florida, as did the ancient Chinese in the Pacific. Columbus ignored evidence that the Earth was three times larger than his charts and plans assumed, and was purely lucky that a whole unknown continent lay between him and his goal, China.

The basic trouble with making scientific-sounding estimates in support of SETI is that they finally rest upon an imponderable puzzle: us. We do not understand the imperatives driving our evolution and attitudes well enough to generalize beyond our noses.

Brian Aldiss once told me a story which neatly illustrates our problem. It seems an Oxford college received a bequest, and the senior fellows gathered to decide how to invest it. Their bursar felt they should sink the money into property. "After all, property has served us well for the last thousand years."

But then the Senior Fellow, voice shaking, replied, "Yes, but you know, the last thousand years have been exceptional."

Our entire experience of high technology has been exceptional — and exceptionally short, one hopes, if civilizations have much hope of enduring on the galactic stage. In selecting radio for SETI we advocate a technology less than a century old.

As a species, we turned at least three great techno-tricks. First came our invention about a million years ago of stone tools. We numbered perhaps a few hundred thousand then, spread out in tribes in Africa and perhaps across Asia. Archaeological traces show a rise to several million of us when the next trick appeared, probably driven by the necessity of crowding our resources: agriculture. Cultivation drove the human population exponentially for several thousand years, though it hit a plateau until the industrial revolution, our most recent trick.

Most sf readers believe that one further, essentially open-ended trick remains: developing the resources of the solar system. Our numbers now edge toward six billion, with demographers projecting a world population in the next century peaking at between ten and twenty billion, if the low birth rates of the industrial world eventually become common everywhere. The opening of space could lead, by scaling from these ear-

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lier tricks, to a human population of perhaps a hundred billion scattered throughout the inner solar system.

Think of the SETI implications of such a society, which could easily afford to invest the energy resources of our entire current civilization in radio signaling. If this is a typical development for aliens, then the SETI dilemma — what if there are plenty of aliens, but everybody's taking the cheap way out, merely listening? — is solved.

But is this path of ever-widening resources, and the tools that can manage them, typical?

Much of what we believe about our upward trek from the neolithic is broad, often inaccurate generalization. For most of this century, archaeologists believed that the world's first potters were near eastern farmers. We now have even older pottery made by Japanese fishermen. A staple of our scenario for civilization is the importance of agriculture as a new, city-forming technology. Natives of what is now Mexico learned to cultivate corn, yet still remained essentially nomadic for three thousand more years. Similarly, early European farmers used slash-and-burn cultivation which forced them to move as the old fields wore out.

The sedentary, information-building habits of comfy villages (reading, writing, 'rithmetic) do not necessarily follow from agriculture, as long as there is plentiful land. Apparently, in the near east our species was simply too successful, our numbers rose, and we had to invent both fishing and stationary agriculture to feed ourselves, about eight to ten thousand years ago.

But even sitting still does not necessarily bring about an inevitable, triumphant upward march. The Maya of southern Mexico and Central America built a widespread empire with huge pyramids and developed written script, but never produced great cities.

The Incas of Peru did develop cities, roads and a vast political empire, without learning to write. Neither society discovered the wheel as a transportation tool, though they did use them on toys, and had rollers for carts. Without good roads, wheels aren't so effective.

Of course, many other civilizations did master more. Still, the diverse talents developed by our own ancestors point to a real possibility that an intelligent species does not necessarily have to eventually produce all the skills necessary to join the Radio Club.

Nor need they have our motivation. Most societies in human history have been disinterested in sci-

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ence and only grudgingly open to advances in technology. Many have avoided contact with outsiders, rather than seeking it, in the recent western model.

Witness the Chinese Ming Dynasty of over 500 years ago, which excelled the Europeans in deep sea craft. They explored throughout the Indian Ocean and reached Africa, perhaps even California. Dawning realization of the diverse cultures far over their horizon caused the rulers of this powerful navy to retreat, fearing invasion of mainland China by disruptive social forces. They broke down their largest ships and dispersed the seasoned crews who could have rounded Africa and reached Europe — or, going east, discovered the Americas.

This failure of nerve is a classic case of stepping back from opportunities, ventures which would open wide windows on vistas which many fear before they are even glimpsed. It's common, too. Only a minority of human civilizations have ever had the western sense of outward-directed, welcoming contact.

Many alien civilizations could harbor no such sentiments. In this case they will simply ignore the implications of radio, once they develop it.

This issue of motivation is, I think, rather more important than the astronomers have realized—probably because as a breed, they are voraciously curious. Perhaps the observable fact that most people are not inquisitive, but some are, has a deep origin.

Consider that until about ten thousand years ago, when we evidently exceeded the easily gotten resources and settled down, all of us were hunter-gatherers. We formed tribes of at most a few hundred, which is probably why we now organize our lives in overlapping 'tribes' of special interest, from local neighborhoods to a fondness for, say, science fiction. Tribes needed tight organization to survive at all, caroming around in spacious territory.

This shadow of our ancient social habits suggests that roving tribes had a recurrent problem — what to do when they met each other. They saw strange, ugly faces, bizarre customs, differently colored skin, odd eyes. Tribes which simply couldn't make themselves deal with alien tribes could either fight or flee. Either way, they couldn't get any help.

On the other hand, people who could tolerate the alien and come to understand them, often across a language barrier, could choose from a menu of choices. They could trade, or settle territory disputes, or delay a

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fight until they had the advantage, or even set rules for war which minimized casualties. Anyone who could talk persuasively to aliens could probably also command an audience in his own tribe. She might well be chief. So alien appreciation might be written into our social and mental selves at a deep level. Such abilities sit in uneasy tension with tribal suspicion of outsiders, leading to ethnic frictions which will be with us forever, I suspect, often mis-labeled 'racism.'

Would alien societies resemble our social evolution in this way? Perhaps, if they were hunter-gatherers. Many other strategies are available in our own animal kingdoms — herbivores, chipmunks, monkeys that seldom leave the same stand of tropical forest. So radically different aliens are certainly plausible. On these grounds it may be quite unlikely that even technological aliens will be likely to want to talk — or listen.

And mere idle curiosity won't do. SETI has taken decades to get solid funding since the ideas first became widespread. Frank Drake and others who have been on board since the beginning suspect that the odds are low, so a search might last several more decades — and then will end because of diminishing probable returns, as we probe further away, listening for the whispering voice, faintly crying out in the background hiss.

This suggests that some genuine tenacity is necessary to fly across the vast parsecs on electromagnetic wings. How common might that determination be? Again, our origin as a species suggests pessimism. Our hunting strategy is very specialized. All evidence suggests that we hunted in groups, and were unafraid to take on quite sizable game, such as mastodons.

Our method, though, was not to rely upon brave displays of courage. Rather, we shout and wave sticks and run after the prey. Typical grazing animals spook easily, run well, then tire. They often stop within a fraction of a mile and go back to cropping grass. Most carnivores who fail to make a catch on their first lunge also lose interest, rest up a bit, and wait for another target to amble by.

We did not. Instead, we pursued the same prey to its next stop. Surprised it again. Ran it until it outdistanced us. How those grazers must have hated us!

We aren't particularly fast compared with, say, a cheetah, but we are the greatest distance runners in creation. That's why the American

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Indians used men, not riders on horseback, to carry distant messages. The men held up better.) Eventually, we could run down the tired grazer: a guaranteed result, if we persisted.

In this tenacity lies our major difference from other omnivores, and certainly from carnivores. We speak much of our brains, our opposable thumbs, our two-footed grace — but maybe stubborn perseverance is the key asset we or any alien will need to make SETI work.

If so, such aliens are probably rare. Our strategy is shared by few other species here, despite ample opportunity to flourish. Does this mean octopus-like aliens who can manipulate objects but do not pursue game are out of the Radio Club? Or that herbivores generally are in the wrong business to begin with, hemmed in by short attention spans? Such thoughts imply skepticism about a galaxy packed with eager correspondents.

But what is persistence, after all? Basically, it means the ability to sustain effort over time significant to your own well being — getting fed, in the case of hunting. Perhaps more germanely for a SETI project funded by a government with the attention span of a term in office, can we envision a species which nourishes efforts much beyond the life span of an individual?

Any truly long-lasting talk between the stars will require that. We have a few institutions which preserve historical continuity, the longest lived being the great religious bodies such as the Catholic church, which holds the record at about 2000 years.

But what is an individual life span? For humans in the famous Hobbesian state of nature, it was about twenty-five years on average. Excavations of ancient burials have shown that in prehistory we lived lives that may not have been nasty and brutish, but were indeed demonstrably short. No skeletons of those who reached age thirty did not have a major broken bone, and nearly all showed skeletal signs of vitamin deficiency.

But that's nasty old nature. We now live beyond 75 on average, with prospects of perhaps 125 within a century or so. (Since our average expectancy has increased by half again in a century, this isn't a crazy possibility.)

Is there some limit on the lifespans of aliens? Fundamental evolutionary reasons imply that mortality is built into most species. Creatures effectively enhance their ability to reproduce while young, by trading off against problems later in

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life. Evolution doesn't care if you die after you've passed on your genes.

So probably aliens will confront mortality as profoundly as we — unless their technology eliminates the problem. The experts on aging whom I know believe there is probably no solid limit on the human life span, given ever-questioning science and appropriate technology — or if there is, it is probably several centuries.

This suggests that 'high' civilizations of sophisticated technology may be very important for long-lived SETI. They will live long and prosper, with time to indulge such odd, expensive hobbies as SETI broadcasting. Many SETI enthusiasts harbor gloomy sentiments that such societies will inevitably either incinerate themselves in wars, or drown in their own garbage, i.e., environmental catastrophe.

I suspect this is a hasty generalization from our current list of Big Problems. Consider how few of these ideas were current even a century ago. In a century or two more, we will probably have a different menu of worries. Projecting them into our SETI estimates is short-sighted.

SETI scientists estimate their chances using the famous 'Drake equation,' which estimates the number of available technological civilizations in the galaxy. It contains astronomical estimates (probabilities of a star having habitable planets), biological ones (chances of developing highly intelligent forms), and finally social ones (chances of producing technology, and then wanting to do SETI).

By far the most sensitive factor of all is the lifetime of those communities, because we know absolutely nothing about it, beyond the fact that we have survived into our radio-emitting era only a bit more than sixty years, since the first radio telescope in 1931.

Many astronomers have taken their crack at the equation, estimating the various probabilities differently (much as considerable latitude enters in estimating the success of cryonics, as I discussed last time). Strikingly, most get a similar result: the number of currently active civilizations in our galaxy is of the same order of magnitude as the lifetime of an average Radio Club candidate civilization, measured in years.

If the typical alien society lasts a million years, then, there are about a million of them currently in the galaxy. Since the galaxy has about 300 billion stars in it, that means we would need to search 300,000 stars to find a Radio Club member, on average.

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The typical separation of such members is about six hundred light years. Think of such societies sending messages back and forth, with about a thousand years needed for one round trip — say, a question and its answer. Then in the million year lifetime of the average civilization, there would be time for about a thousand exchanges.

These would be members of the Galactic Radio Club, slowly able to amass knowledge and history from others. A bit of arithmetic shows that there is a critical lifetime for societies which allows them to enter into this cross-talk. It works out to be about 3500 years. If the average civilization lasts less than this, then a similar society is too far away for a single exchange of messages.

If Club members live longer, though, they probably win big, experiencing an exponential benefit. Communication yields learning, which could affect the lifetime. High technologies would perhaps be spurred to interstellar travel, colonies, the whole Galactic Empire motif so beloved of science fiction. Such societies would then probably produce many radio-emitting sites.

My bias favors knowledge. Civilizations with more of it may well live longer. This means that the 3500 year mark is a minimum down payment. Once met, I suspect societies live longer, and SETI gets easier.

Notice that this is unstable, driving lifetimes up. The galaxy then gains Club members, and the numbers change with time, keeping civilizations around longer so they are on average nearer. This favors societies which come along a bit later.

Our galaxy has been spinning about ten billion years. The first billion or two years probably laid the ground work, literally, for life, by building up heavier elements that make for interesting life forms (iron, carbon).

Thereafter, perhaps another four or five billion years must pass before intelligence arises on the first-born worlds. That means that seven billion years into our galaxy's history, the Club could start to grow.

That was three billion years ago. An obvious question, first posed by Enrico Fermi, is *Where are they*? Shouldn't some have visited Earth by now? Or at least, how come the night sky is not full of Radio Club members?

A few decades of listening will comb through most of the choices — in radio frequencies, Doppler shifts of those frequencies by planetary motions, signal durations and pulse strengths — available to us. If the skies are still silent, then we will

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have to rethink our position.

That means looking not only outward, but backward — into time, into our origins. Maybe we really are quite special. Or maybe aliens are talking on some other circuit, one that will not seem natural to us.

For example, maybe radio is kid stuff. Consider if the ancient Romans had developed visual signaling to knit their empire together. Using mirrors to reflect sunlight to the next relay point on the horizon, the heliograph engineer could block and unblock the beam to carry a Morse Code-style message.

L. Sprague deCamp suggested this in *Lest Darkness Fall.* Now suppose light messages became the prevailing paradigm. Progressing through the Industrial Revolution, heliographs would use automated mirrors, electric arc lamps, moving on to lasers and fiber optics.

Why use radio? many would ask. Light can carry more information, in principle, since the message-bearing is proportional to frequency, and optical light beats radio by a factor of nearly a million. Sure, being limited to line of sight is a problem, but relay stations are no technical difficulty. While fog can block sunbeam signals, lightning interferes with radio.

Extending this argument to aliens, perhaps they do not use radio, preferring optical. Then we should look for very fast signals, variations in amplitude or frequency in a billionth of a second. Their local sun would swamp the optical radiation, but that simply means a smart alien would use infrared lasers. That way, the signal would pop up above the star's rather weak emission in those wavelengths. Infrared lasers are cheap and easy to build, even for us radio addicts.

This reasoning implies a different SETI strategy. Instead of pricey radio telescopes, use an ordinary small telescope with some fast electronics attached. Such a rig costs a few tens of thousands of dollars. Amateurs could do it! There are many who might be so inclined, just as a corps of amateurs has discovered most of the asteroids in this century, through patient hours in back yards.

My larger point here is that social biases, tradition, and culture shape technology. They always have. Consider nuclear technology, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and genetic engineering. The technologically unversed have greatly affected these technologies, usually impeding them.

Radio seems 'natural' to us, but really advanced aliens may use, say, neutrinos. After all, we in the American west no longer use the long-

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distance communication technology favored by the inhabitants of this region only a few centuries ago: smoke signals.

In that case, perhaps we should look for their accidental signatures — effects far outside the radio SETI paradigm.

For example, I have worked for some years on theoretical explanations of the dozens of mysterious long, luminous strands seen at our galactic center, which stand out so strikingly in the radio frequencies. Proceeding in conventional fashion, I calculated that they could be plasma discharges carrying huge currents — a kind of frozen lightning bolt. This is a strange, though acceptable, picture.

But suppose their structure — half a light year wide and hundreds of light years long — is not natural at all? If they serve some artificial end, what could it be? A transportation corridor, like a freeway? A power source? A religious monument?

As I'm fond of having my characters in sf novels remark, the thing about aliens is, they're *alien*. Maybe we can't guess such functions, even in principle. Perhaps noticing artificiality is the best we can manage.

But of course, our impulse as scientists is to find a natural model, even if it involves electrical discharges a hundred light years long. Indeed, we *prefer* such models. They are more 'scientific,' and certainly they are less disturbing.

Or take another class of astronomical objects, the speeding neutron stars recently detected in several parts of the galaxy. The latest discovery stands revealed in a radio map on the cover of the March 11, 1993 *Nature*. A clear bow shock curls back from a tight point of radio emission. This knot is evidence of a compact source emitting relativistic electrons.

Underlying the cloud of electrons is a neutron star moving at above 800 kilometers per second. This is fast enough to let it escape the gravitational potential of the galaxy itself. We can measure the 0.68 second period of the radio pulsar and so know that a neutron star is powering this bright shock wave, which energizes electrons and makes them radiate.

But what of other such shock waves elsewhere in the galaxy, which we have seen without a pulsar? They look remarkably like the wakes of great vessels. Could they be some method of transport, starships winging their way?

Almost certainly not, but the fact that we can now see such relatively faint scratches across the ra-

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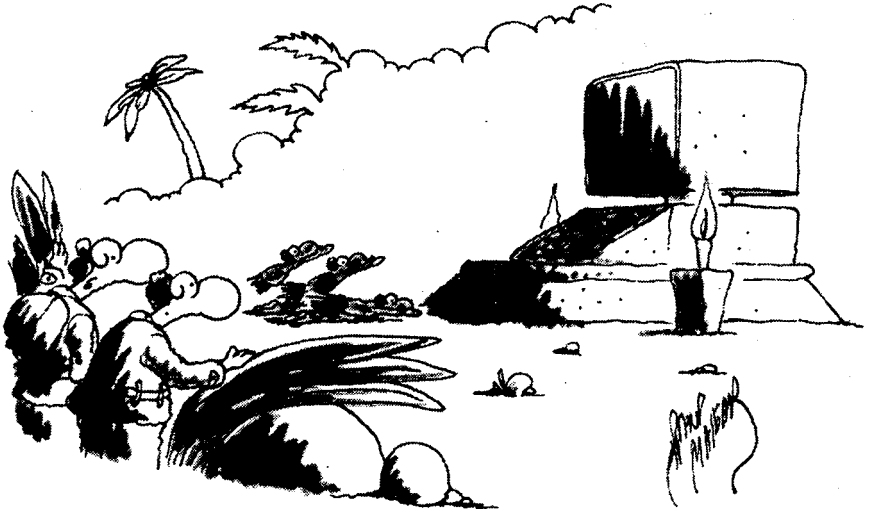
dio-visible sky suggests that we should keep our minds open. A true starship would presumably be faster and fainter, unless the crew is fond of wasting a lot of energy in useless radio waves.

More generally, we should be alive to the possibility of accidental discoveries — and strange ones. Meanwhile, conventional SETI is the best bet. With steady funding, it should show us within our lifetimes whether there is a Radio Club, or whether we are a rare breed.

Which will it be? We are about to find out.



"So much for your untouched by modern civilization theory."

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Laurel Winter is a Minnesota writer who is one of the few members of her generation to attend a one-room country grade school (one teacher for eight grades). She misses the mountains but never again wants to live more than ten minutes away from a library. Her husband is continually adding new features to their house. She never knows what it's going to do or say next. Ditto with the kids (eight-year-old twins). The house is easier to debug than the kids, but not as interesting.

Laurie wrote "The Negotiator" during an informal writers' retreat in Wisconsin. She started freewriting about aliens. That combined with an idea she'd had for years, about a society with rigid rules about eating. Laurie's first story for F&SF *("Infinity Syrup" June, 1992) was also about food. She has one more food story in our inventory and another to do with...paint. Hmmm. There must be a connection somewhere.*

The Negotiator

By Laurel Winter

THE FEMALE SAT ACROSS the cloth-strewn table from Kim and poured shapes on the surface of the sweet oil. The bowl was heavy, wide-lipped, with tiny four-toed feet radiating outward to form the base. Kim hoped they were clay rather than body parts.

They said you could tell a lot about Smilies from the shapes they poured. If you knew shapes, that is. Kim didn't. The female's shapes were distinct at first, almost geometric. Then she flicked the side of the bowl with one thick-nailed finger and the edges jittered and blurred and flowed into one another. It was like taking a Rorschach from a computer psych that had been programmed by a cat. It meant nothing to you, but you felt you should understand.

Kim's coverall showed dull gray, a contrast to the tangled cloths on the table and the vivid garments of the alien. She risked a glance to see that the switch on her left shoulder was set in its customary chameleon mode. It was one thing to *know* that she was out of contact with the minute electrical

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current that determined the programmable color of the ship's walls and furnishings; it was quite another to be so visible here on an alien planet.

She felt like shifting on the cushioned bench, but she knew that would be a breach of etiquette. The nearest equivalent the ship's archives could come up with was the old Japanese tea ceremony. But the Smilies — closer to human than anyone yet encountered — practiced the pouring of shapes at every meal, along with their highly ritualized eating, and their society showed little resemblance to historical Japan in other ways.

Kim had been briefed: *Do not move unnecessarily. Do not speak until your host speaks. Take food — no matter what it is — when it is offered; the bacteria planted in your gut will digest the native enzymes. Eat only with your left hand. Do not stare at the Smilies for protracted lengths of time.*

Instead, she looked around the room. Tiny strips of fabric of varying lengths hung from the ceiling. They fluttered in the irregular breeze from small, screened windows. The moving air also brought her waves of mingled scent from the food bowls, the sweet oil, the alien. The floor was unmortared stone tiles of different sizes, closely fitted together, strewn with numerous small rugs. Only the walls were unadorned, rough, pale wood that caught the light from the lamp over the table and held shadows within well-defined grain.

The xenos had told Kim it was significant that the meeting room was separated from the city proper by a kilometer or so. The implication was that outsiders were not welcome within the city unless they were formally invited. Every asymmetric city and town had an equivalent building, they informed her, stressing the importance of these ceremonies even within the culture. How much more important would it be for a delegation from the stars?

The female interrupted Kim's thoughts by reaching into one of the smaller bowls that covered the table, nestling among twisted cloths of every color and texture. The bowl was unglazed ceramic with fluted edges, filled with lengths of some sort of reddish root vegetable. Kim took one. She dipped it into a cup of thin, gray sauce, as the female had. Then, careful not to touch her lips with her fingers, she took the vegetable chunk between her teeth. *Do not draw the food into your mouth until your hand is completely away. Dip just your fingertips into the bowl of sweet oil after every bite; this is for cleansing. If you're artistic, make your own patterns. If you're not, try not*

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to mess up the shapes that are already there. All these rules had been learned by trial and error; meaning the ceremony had been broken off as soon as a human violated an unknown taboo. They'd gone through a fair percentage of field personnel just determining what not to do.

Kim cautiously inserted her fingers into the oil and withdrew them again. The nearest shape flowed toward her and took on five legs.

The tart vegetable crunched in her mouth, mingled with the spices of the sauce. Her next bite — a round meat with a thin central core of gristle — was dipped in an acidic sauce that stung her nose and burned the inside of her mouth. And everything after the first mouthful also tasted slightly of the sweet oil that coated her fingers.

She had been chosen partly because she was left-handed and tended to have eclectic tastes in food. The first person to try the ceremony — a registered xenologist — had gagged on something he later described as "deep-fried rotten milk dipped in hot sauce." The gagging had not made a good impression on the Smilies.

But the main reason, Captain Serinal told her, was because — of all the lefties on the ship — she had the lowest self-confidence rating. "The aliens tend to be cautious," the captain said. "Their heavy reliance on ritual shows that they don't make quick, independent decisions. All of our registered xenos think too fast or something. The Smilies don't like them." She regarded Kim with what looked like a doubtful expression. "Maybe they'll like you better."

Kim shared that doubt. It was hard to tell with the Smilies, because their natural expression looked like a lipless smile over a broad band of cartilage that functioned as teeth. The center of the mouth went almost to a point, with a slight upward curve to the corners. With their nostrils hidden behind the sides of a hard, flat nose and their tiny, round eyes, the smile was definitely the dominant feature. That was another problem, the captain told her; humans subconsciously felt the Smilies were friendly.

Not a problem for me, thought Kim, taking a bite of something stringy and mild dipped in something thick and sour. She tended to distrust smiles, to be put on her guard. Not a great way to spend a cocktail party, but perhaps appropriate when trying to establish a relationship with aliens.

The female dipped her fingers into the central bowl and brought them directly to her mouth, sucking each finger. Kim followed suit, the sweet oil

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coating her mouth and clinging to her tongue. No one had reached this stage before, she thought. Maybe she'd done well. Or maybe the finger sucking was some sort of insult which she'd just returned and they were about to kill her and break off relations with the humans entirely.

She let her hand rest, fingers up like the legs of a dead animal, on the table before her. It was a close approximation of the way the female held her own hand, with its four spindly digits. The back of Kim's hand lay across two cloths, yellow with the texture of wet silk and a harsher roll of variegated blues that made her want to scratch.

Almost immediately, juvenile Smilies came into the room and cleared away the numerous little bowls of food and sauce onto huge, circular trays. When they had gone, others entered and removed any soiled table dressings, replacing them with newly twisted cloth. One skimmed off the surface of the bowl of sweet oil and replenished it from a pitcher. Another brought two narrow bowls of steaming oil and water and placed them in front of Kim and the female.

Again following the other's lead, Kim plunged her hand in up to the wrist, almost gasping at the heat, slightly above comfort level for human skin. Unless they were planning to scald her, this seemed like a normal end to the meal.

Still, she didn't relax. The female was probably going to speak now. Kim didn't trust the talkbox embedded in the front of her uniform. Supposedly, the language specialists on the ship, who had been monitoring the alien broadcasts for weeks and listening in with scatterbugs, had programmed the talkbox so it could translate Kim's words into Smile and vice versa. They told her it was "crude but effective." She only bet on the first part.

The female let her hand air dry for a few seconds and pushed the bowl of hot, oily water aside. Kim did the same. Her mouth was moist with sweet oil residue. She wished she had a glass of wine or bubble — anything to cut the oil taste. Now that the food was gone, the dominant smell was the burnt egg odor of the alien.

The female spoke, low measured syllables that seemed not to pause between words.

Kim's talkbox hesitated for a moment. <Greeting good or well eaten>

The captain hadn't been able to tell her what to say; no one had ever gotten this far before. "Hello," she said. "Well eaten and well served." The

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talkbox emitted a string of syllables and the female cocked her head.

Kim hoped it hadn't just said the equivalent of "Your spacesuit is full of piss." What in space was she doing here? Her head ached and the combination of strange foods rumbled in her stomach. She hoped that was polite.

The talkbox said <You or yours is named interrogative tone>

Damn those langies. Couldn't they at least program it to say "question" instead of "interrogative tone"? "Kim," she said. "Who are you?"

The Smiley carefully repeated "Kim" and then a short combination which the talkbox ignored.

Kim tried to replicate it. "Sa-me-ka? Sa-me-ka."

She had never been good at languages. Okay, maybe, but not good. Sa-me-ka seemed satisfied, though. She didn't turn away, as she — or another Smiley, perhaps — had on every other occasion of human contact. <Interrogative tone Kim associates with poor or bad eaters>

That must mean the other humans, the ones who had screwed up. What should she say? Damn the captain to vacuum for getting her into this. "The poor eaters," she said, "will learn from Kim. They will become good eaters."

<Good or well>

Kim just sat there, wondering what to say next. Sa-me-ka was silent as well.

After several minutes by her wrister, Sa-me-ka leaned forward and touched Kim's hand, tapping her fingertips against Kim's blunt cut nails. <Kim is wise or sneaky tomorrow perhaps for formal or serious talk eat> The alien withdrew her hand and — deliberately not turning her back on Kim — left the room.

Kim sat for a moment, breathing hard. Now she would have to go back to the ship, find out what she *should have* done. And if "talk eat" got any more "formal or serious" she wouldn't be able to handle it. She started sweating and barely made it back to the shuttle in time to vomit the alien food into the cycler.

Aboard the starship, Captain Serinal had Kim report to briefing almost before she'd had time to wash the bile taste from her mouth. She gulped a bubbler on the way, touching the smooth corridor wall with her free hand. Her coverall sensed the charge through her feet and turned maroon with

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silvery squiggles to match the floor.

"Good work, Ensign," said the captain. She was seated on the far side of the briefing room in a swivel desk, her own coverall flaming red. She nodded to Kim to take the seat to her left. The floor and ceiling, as smooth as the walls that met them in rounded corners, swirled with pale colors that reminded Kim of a washed-out version of the aliens' table covering. Kim felt dizzy. Her coverall oscillated between the swirling colors and the wood simulation of the chair before compromising with a greenish brown.

"We monitored your session with the Smiley through ayvees on the base of the talkbox," the captain said. A screen near the oval door showed a wide-angle view of the meeting room from about Kim's collarbone level. "A string of satellites in stationary orbit relayed the signals to us as we orbited. Start it at the beginning and turn up the sound," she told a tech. "I want to get the Ensign's comments."

"I didn't know what to do," said Kim. Her voice shook.

Captain Serinal looked surprised. "It's over now," she said. "What you did seemed to work. I just want to go over the session with you while it's fresh in your mind."

"Okay," Kim whispered, although she would rather have gone to her pod and tranked out for a while.

They went over the session in tremendous detail, Captain Serinal and a couple xenos questioning Kim on the alien's words as well as the flavor of each sauce and the approximate temperature of the washing bowl at the end of the meal. She answered where she could, said "I'm not sure" frequently and somehow managed to get through.

"Tomorrow," said Captain Serinal, "you can — "

"Can't someone else do it?" she asked. "Now that you know the steps?"

"But what if the steps are different?" the captain asked. "Tomorrow is 'formal or serious.' That may not be the same. So far, you've shown yourself to be the best at following the alien's cues."

Kim didn't feel the best. "I didn't know what to do," she said. "The whole time, I didn't know what to do. And tomorrow — even if it's the same, I don't think I can — "

"You can," said Captain Serinal, "and you will." She gave Kim a level glance. "Get a little sleep and some real food. Then be back here in about eight hours. We'll be able to give you more to go on this time, now that we've

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seen how the Smilies operate. Cautious beings — like yourself."

Kim nodded, and somehow made it back to her pod before she threw up again. After her experience on the planet, the interior of the ship — of her own pod — seemed alien. The slick surfaces, designed to repel dust. The fans, continually sucking away used air and replacing it with fresh. The absence of smell and sound that weren't absence at all, merely efficient masking.

The earlier walk between meeting room and shuttle, though it had been brief and hurried, had awakened a hunger for earth — soil, rather — and open skies. The alien equivalent of grass, a stubby, broad-leafed plant that let the ground show through, made her miss grass fiercely. Or even carpet, anything but the smooth, slightly springy material that formed the interior of the ship.

Even tranked, it was hard to sleep. She'd managed to choke down half a soup, nothing more. She kept dreaming that she dipped her food in the wrong bowl, and every time she tried to put her fingers in the sweet oil, it walked away on its little feet. Sa-me-ka stood on her head and turned her smile into a huge frown that grew...Kim half woke and thumbed herself another dose of trank until she was maxed out and the ship wouldn't give her any more. At least then she could sleep.

But that meant she was muzzy when her wrister woke her in time to get back to briefing. She pulled on a fresh coverall and gave her face a quick sonic. "I can't do this," she whispered to herself.

Everyone else — it seemed — believed that she could.

SA-ME-KA LOOKED at the door for a long moment after Kim arrived. She was flanked by two other Smilies, one male and one female. <Poor or bad eaters good or well interrogative tone>

Was she supposed to bring someone with her this time? Was that what "formal or serious" meant? She dug her fingers into the layers and layers of cloth that cushioned the bench, her hands hidden from the Smilies by the table. "The eaters are still poor," she said, slowly, trying to keep her voice steady. "They haven't learned from Kim."

<Acceptable> Sa-me-ka stopped talking. She picked up the little pitcher of light yellow oil and began to pour her shapes.

Kim clung to every movement with her mind. Food, sauce, eat, dip fingers. After a little while, she encountered the rotten milk stuff, but she was

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concentrating so hard on Sa-me-ka's next move, and the moves of her companions, that she swallowed it almost mechanically.

More of the same, the captain had told her. Do what she had done. She would do the right thing. There had been a few details on what to say and what not to say, but they hadn't given her much. "We don't want to mess you up," Captain Serinal had said, "by giving you too much information."

Her stomach rumbled and cursed. She was going to throw up, she thought, which would definitely not be the right thing. Before Sa-me-ka or one of the others could pick up another piece of food, she stuck her fingers in the oil and began to lick them, fighting off the feeling of nausea.

The Smilies followed her lead. After the young ones had cleared the numerous bowls away and refurbished the table, and their hands were clean and dry, Kim sat for a long time, trying to control her roiling stomach. Finally, when she felt she could open her mouth without vomiting, she said, "Greeting. Well eaten."

Sa-me-ka responded in kind. Another silence. Kim cursed herself for ending the meal; apparently that meant she had the burden of conversation.

She tried thinking of her last briefing. The Smilies had sophisticated astronomical observatories, but no space travel. As far as the instruments on the ship could tell, they had no nuclear weapons — or if they had, they'd never used them. In fact, they used few weapons at all, seeming to end conflicts through endless negotiation. The proper thing to do, if you were insulted, was to turn your back on the offending party. Apparently, Smilies never knifed one another in the back. She wondered how they would fare with humans.

Sa-me-ka and the other two appeared to be as anxious as Kim not to do anything wrong. She could see the four of them just sitting there forever, not knowing the next step and unwilling to risk a mistake.

It was the thought of the debriefing, going over this endless silent segment with the captain, that finally prompted Kim to speak. "What do you want me to say?" she asked.

Sa-me-ka hesitated. <Speak together interrogative tone>

Kim could translate that two ways: either Sa-me-ka was asking if she could confer with the other Smilies, or she was asking if Kim was ready to talk. Either way, she supposed, the answer was yes. "Yes," she said.

The three aliens huddled together, like children telling secrets. The talkbox picked up a few syllables, but mingled as they were, the isolated

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words made no sense. Kim's headache began to take her mind off the condition of her stomach.

"What are we doing here?" she whispered. The talkbox translated.

Kim felt her face go white. The Smilies broke off their discussion and stared at her. <Kim speak to Kim> Sa-me-ka said, via the talkbox.

Answer your own question, she took that to mean. Oh, space and time. How many times had she asked herself that in the last four years? Some number approaching infinity? And how secure was she that she knew the answer? Even if she figured out what *she* was doing here, how did she know that Captain Serinal didn't have secret orders to subjugate and exploit the aliens? But now wasn't the time to explore that thought.

"We try to understand things," she said slowly. "We ask questions and try to find answers." Was the talkbox getting this? she wondered. Did it make any more sense to the Smilies than it did to her, or was their side also cluttered up with stupid things like "interrogative tone"? "We looked at the stars, as you do. We found many answers and many questions. Then we learned to travel among the stars." Damn Captain Serinal. She should be here instead of Kim. "We are poor eaters," she said. "But we want to learn, even if we're scared, even if we don't know what to do or what to say."

The talkbox continued after Kim stopped speaking, translating her words into Smile. She wasn't breathing right, she found, trying to slow down the intake of air, to take it further into her chest.

The Smilies sat for several minutes. What were they thinking? And what was the captain thinking, after hearing what she had said? She had just represented humanity as scared and confused, when that was really just how *she* felt.

Kim waited for Sa-me-ka to speak, feeling dizzy, detached from herself, able to monitor her own rapid pulse. The Smiley reached forward and again touched Kim's hand. <All or universal poor or bad eaters> she said. <All or universal attempting knowledge fighting or negotiating fear>

She touched Sa-me-ka's hand with her own, feeling the lightly oiled skin, the thick nails. All or universal fighting or negotiating fear, she thought. Captain Serinal, confident in her every decision, would not agree with that. Neither would most of the other crew members; you figured out what to do and then you did it, Caleb, one of the xenos, had told her. If you hesitated, you lost.

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"Let us talk eat tomorrow," she said to Sa-me-ka. "Kim needs to speak together with the other eaters." They were going to make her continue, she knew, because they were all too sure of their training and abilities. The Smilies just wouldn't understand someone who wasn't fighting or negotiating with her fear.

Kim backed out of the meeting place politely, her gut tense, trying to determine which was worse, the captain or the aliens.

Both, she decided. She hoped she wasn't getting an ulcer. She imagined the starship, an ungainly metal organism moving through the sky above her, staring down at the world and at her through sensor eyes. The new head negotiator made her unsteady way back to the shuttle, trying not to throw up.

Editorial (from page 6)

pioneer teacher of science fiction, and was active in its establishment as a legitimate academic subject.

But his writing is the greatest gift he gives us. Jack has published steadily since his first sale in 1928. He has written several *million* words of magazine fiction, and has published over thirty books which have been translated in languages ranging from Serbo-Croatian to Japanese. He has received numerous honors, including the Science Fiction Hall of Fame Award, the Pilgrim Award, and the Grand Master Nebula "for lifetime achievement."

I'm pleased that Eastern New Mexico University will celebrate Jack's contribution to the field. Too often we fail to acknowledge the writers who have influenced our genre while they are still with us. Jack has influenced me: from his writing — especially his short stories, his essays on sf in *People Machines*, and his novel, *Darker Than You Think*, which is one of my all time favorite books — to his teaching (he was an instructor at a writing workshop I attended in 1986). He has supported the publications I've edited (please see his story, "The Litlins" in this issue), and he has been a good friend.

Here's to 65 wonderful years in science fiction, Jack. And may there be many more.

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Eric T. Baker was born in Reno, Nevada, where, he says, he has been thrown out of casinos since he was six years old. He now lives in a suburb of Washington, D.C.. Eric attended Clarion Writers Workshop in 1989. "Faith and Friendship in the Pre-Atomic Age" marks Eric's first appearance in print. He has sold another story, this one to Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine.

Faith and Friendship in the Pre-Atomic Age

By Eric T. Baker

One

IN THE SUMMER OF 1945, I WAS a seven-year-old boy living in a suburb of Nagasaki. Most things in my life have been shaped by this fact. Personal things particularly. My reactions and my convictions are all flavored by what I lived through and the guilt I feel for having lived at all. This fact of my childhood explains why I showed no emotion when the numbing effects of Richard's time machine faded and I found myself in the midst of another slaughter.

Our destination had been my apartment in modern Japan. We stood instead in the midst of another ancient Jewish village, this one a sad parody of the busy communities we had visited in the previous week. The noise and commerce of those villages was reduced here to silence and stillness. The villagers themselves turned into scattered corpses.

Richard was already kneeling over one of the decaying bodies. Even after his two year "sabbatical" helping rebuild our cathedral, my English was still

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better than his Japanese, but he was more accustomed to his machine's effects. Richard was two hundred centimeters of brown-haired, brown-eyed American and in the American fashion, he was cursing himself, the flies, the dead, and the smell.

Jesus simply wept.

Two

THERE WERE perhaps three dozen huts to the village, arranged in two parallel lines on either side of a dirt road that was little more than two ruts stretching from horizon to horizon across the desert. At the village center was a well with a rough set stone wall around it. The huts were of mud brick and most had ladders or staircases that led to their roofs.

While we were in Galilee, waiting for Jesus to enter the Wilderness so we could invite him to the cathedral's dedication, I had purchased a linen scarf to keep the sand and sweat from my neck. Now I moved the scarf to my nose. I knew from my childhood experiences that I would have to burn these clothes. The smell would soak into them, and I would never be able to pull them on without reliving this scene.

Richard keeps his pistol in his hand while he jumps in time and he had not yet put it away. "We're going to have to have a look around," he said. "This appears a couple days old, but there may be stragglers." Jesus wandered away toward one of the huts, pausing at each body he passed. "Tell him to be careful."

"Be careful," I called after Jesus in Hebrew, but he gave no sign of hearing. "Where are we?" I asked Richard, switching back to English.

"Well, the clothes still look basically Judean. The desert hasn't changed. Lots of hoof marks and horse shit. The bodies mostly have sword or knife wounds. I'd say that we are in the same place spatially, but a few hundred years earlier in time. If this was part of one of the invasions of this area, and we could figure out which one, I could tell you for sure."

"We were trying to go back to 1985. How do you know we didn't go forward in time?"

"The road isn't paved," Richard said, indicating the ruts with the gun. "The nice thing about this part of the world is that the Romans conquered it.

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That gives a reliable dividing line in history. On one side, all the roads are paved for hundreds of years. On the other, they aren't."

Trust an American to tell time by the roads. "How long before your machine recharges?" I asked.

We had been friends for a year and a half before Richard trusted me with his secret. "I have to be careful," he had told me that night in my apartment. "The Designers' civilization is extinct, and the machines' secrets died with it. There are a finite number of 'cubes, and not many are on Earth. They're worth killing for, and a lot of people have. I'm glad I was given mine."

Now at my mention of his artifact, Richard tossed the little silver polyhedron in the air and caught it overhanded while answering my question. "The Romans conquered Judea around 70 B.C. There were thirty some years between 0 B.C. and 1 A.D., so we traveled at least one hundred years. Minimum of twenty hours before we can jump again. Probably longer. Help me with my pack." We both wore frame packs filled with forty pounds of camping supplies. "I'll have a look around and then we can get away from this smell."

"Yes," I said, setting his pack in the dust at his feet. I turned to offer mine and said, "Can we do anything about this? When the machine recharges, could we perhaps go back and warn the villagers?"

"No," Richard said, placing my pack next to his. "Moving Jesus around is dangerous enough without looking for trouble. We take him to the dedication, let him give his sermon, and then we put him back in the Wilderness before History notices he's gone."

"Yes, I grant you the danger, but we are going the wrong way in time already. What effect could saving one village have?"

"We're going the wrong way because the cube only has the power to do so much at one time. It's dealing with inertia in four dimensions and Jesus has a lot of mass." Richard tossed the time machine in the air again. "It probably took all the cube's power to get Jesus out of his era. That allowed History to push us back to a place where Jesus is no more significant than we are. Now the cube will have the power to take us forward on our next jump."

Jesus reappeared from out of the hut. He had a child in his arms. "She is alive," he called. "Do you have water?"

Something in my stomach tried to rush out my throat and I had to hold my whole body rigid to keep it in. Richard looked at me with sudden concern. He put a hand on my shoulder. "Akira, what's wrong? Is it one of your

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headaches?"

"He says that she's alive," I told Richard. I had to say it in Japanese. There was no English in my mind. Experience again. In disaster, there is no pity for the dead; the horror lies with the survivors.

"Shit. This is more recent than I thought. Whoever did it may've been close enough to see us land. I've got to get on a roof and check. Are you all right? Do you need a pill? Can you check the rest of the huts?"

"Yes." Yes, I thought, action. Do something. "Yes."

Richard squeezed my shoulder and jogged off. I took my canteen to Jesus. He was holding the little girl in one arm, waving the flies away from her with his other hand. My mind eased a little when I saw her. It was not as bad as Nagasaki. Her skin was stretched over her tiny bones, cracked and brittle looking, but at least it had not been burnt from her. Her eyes were closed and her chest barely moved, but perhaps here we could really do something.

Do something, I repeated, and thrust the canteen into Jesus's free hand. Then I went to the next hut. On its floor, I found the corpse of an old man. His hair was white, but his beard was black with dried blood from his slit throat. I took a moment to put a rug over him.

By the third hut, I stopped covering the dead. By the time Richard came down from the roof, I had delivered five more live children to Jesus and found out why the worst of the rotting flesh smell was coming from the well. "Take care with the water," I told Jesus while setting down a two-year-old. "It may be all we have. The well is full of corpses." I repeated it in English for Richard.

"The good news," Richard said, "is that there is no sign of the attackers between here and the horizon. The bad news is that there is no shelter either."

"And no water?"

"And no water." Richard had his handkerchief out and was wiping the sand from his face while he looked at the children. I did too. Three infants, two toddlers, and the two-year-old. All of them dehydrated and starving. Besides our two-quart canteens, Richard and I each had an extra half gallon of water in our packs. It might take all of that just to clean and rehydrate the children. At least a day (probably more) till we could jump again, and there was no guarantee that it wouldn't be into another desert when we did.

Richard must have done the same math I had; his hand was resting on his gun. Jesus had one of the infants in the crook of his arm and was dribbling water on the child's chapped lips.

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The infant twisted her head and blinked open her eyes. She licked at her lips and tried to cry. Jesus took a mouthful of water and then pressed his lips to the child's.

"So, Akira," Richard asked, "do you think you can explain the historical necessity for euthanasia to Jesus Christ?"

With some moisture back in its throat, the child in Jesus's arms began to cry in earnest. "I shall call you Catherine," Jesus told it.

"We can't kill them." I had to raise my voice so Richard could hear me over the child's cries. He waved a finger at me.

"I understand that you want to help these kids," Richard said, "and I respect you for it, but, historically speaking, they're already dead. We don't have enough supplies to help them. If we try, we'll all die. You have to respect that."

I sat down next to Jesus and took up another child. While I spoke to Richard, I got my canteen and set about reviving the child. "When I was growing up during the war, there was a shortage of everything. After the bomb, there was nothing. We had no surplus to fall back on and there was no transportation to bring us anything." I was silent for a moment while I put water into the child's mouth, then I had to talk louder over his coughing. "What could we do in a situation like that? All around us were the dead and dying. They needed help and we had nothing even for ourselves. What could we do?"

"I understand what you're saying," Richard said in the silence created by my giving more water to the child. "This is different."

"We will call that one Jacob," Jesus said, nodding at my charge and shifting his grip on Catherine.

"Is it really?" I asked Richard. "At Nagasaki, we did what we could. 'Do something.' It was our mantra. 'What did you do today?' 'I did what I could.'"

Looking up from Catherine, Jesus gave me the full benefit of his deep brown eyes. "Are any of the huts free of the dead?" he asked. "We should move these children into the shade; we will need cloth for swaddling and firewood for the night." He lifted the crying girl to Richard.

"What does he want?" Richard asked, looking with distaste at the dirty little child squirming in Jesus's hands. One of the toddlers reached out to Jesus. It gripped his robe, pulled itself to its feet, and looked up at Richard.

"He wants you to take her out of the sun," I said. "Also, we'll need cloth

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and something for a fire. Yes, and look for goat skin, or something that we can make a nipple from."

Jesus was still patiently holding up Catherine to Richard, who looked from one to the other of us.

"You'd never forgive me if I killed them, would you?" Richard asked. "Even though I'd be saving our lives?" I shook my head once. "Fuck me." He reached and took the child, being gentle despite himself. Jesus half turned to take the toddler in his lap. "Did you buy that powdered milk?" Richard asked me.

"Yes," I said. "Jesus wants to call her Catherine."

Richard nodded and started to shift Catherine to his shoulder. The smell stopped him. "Ah. Well, Catherine, why don't we get you out of the sun and see if we can't find you a new diaper?"

THREE

IT TOOK US two hours to treat, feed, and clean the children the first time, and then we had to start over again. The marauders hadn't been able to fit all the dead into the village well, so whenever Richard wanted a rest from the children, he would go out and haul corpses downwind to the latrine trenches. As he put it, "Those bodies smell worse than these kids, and they've got more flies, but at least they're quiet."

There were times when I would have liked to get away too, but I was not up to the effort required to drag the bodies. It was hard enough just keeping up with the children. In addition to the headaches, I also have respiratory trouble, both results of the radiation I was exposed to as a child. Richard would look at me in concern and then mutter to himself, whenever walking one of the children about would leave me sitting with my back to the wall of the hut, gasping for air.

Just after midnight, we ran out of water. We'd sought to ration it, but the children were so near death that we had to spend all the water we had just bringing them back. It was like treating the bomb survivors. We could extend the children's lives, but without water we could not end their suffering. Perhaps Richard's way would have been kinder, but there is always the chance that suffering will end. Death is forever.

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The new day began with the sound of a horse on the road. I had passed out leaning against the wall inside the hut with the one-year-old Abraham in my lap. I had to gently shift him to the woolen carpet before going to the doorway. Richard was stretched out in the back of the hut, still asleep, and Jesus sat across from me with Catherine cradled in his arms. His eyes were open, but they were fixed on nothing. He didn't react to the sound of the horse or to my movement.

From the doorway, I could see that the rider of the horse was not dressed in the robes of a Judean. He had a head cloth and wore a long desert cloak. In Galilee, we had seen men dressed similarly, and Richard had identified them as tribesmen from either the South or the East.

I got to my feet and stepped into the road even before I saw the water skins hanging from this tribesman's saddle, or the bow and quiver hanging next to them. Perhaps because Jesus was with us, I never considered that he might refuse to help us.

"Greetings," I said in Hebrew. "Welcome."

The tribesman looked at me in surprise, then he grabbed for his bow. "No," I said, "I mean you no harm." Did he mistake me for a Mongol? Were there Mongols at this time? He shouted something in a language I didn't understand. "Please, we have sick children here. Put your weapon down." If he understood, he did not obey.

Jesus, with Catherine still in his arms, stepped out of the hut to stand next to me. The tribesman leveled an arrow at him. "Why do you threaten us, brother?" Jesus said.

The tribesman barked something at us, gesturing with the bow, and Jesus said something in what must have been the same language. The tribesman looked puzzled and repeated a word Jesus had used. Jesus repeated it too, and then he was off. I could not understand the words, but the cadence was that of a parable or a lesson. It took him several minutes to tell. I spent the time not waving the flies away from my head for fear of the movement drawing an arrow.

Jesus sounded like he was winding down when there came a restless cry from inside the hut. One child crying would soon wake the others. I nodded at the tribesman, pointed at the hut, and turned to enter it.

"No!" said Jesus and something tugged at my arm. I looked down to find an arrow sticking through my biceps, its metal point red with my blood. I

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looked up to see Jesus now standing beside the tribesman, speaking to him in a voice filled with suppressed anger. I looked over to see Richard, his hair flattened where he had slept on it, standing in the hut's doorway. Richard's eyes were on my arm, and his mouth was wide with surprise. He reached for his pistol, and I reached for his arm.

"No, wait," I said. "Let Jesus talk to him."

"He fucking shot you!"

"He doesn't understand. He didn't mean to. It doesn't hurt. Richard, please."

"It doesn't hurt because you're in shock. Get in here. Lie down. Don't move that arm."

I clutched at him. "Richard. . . ."

"All right, if Jesus can talk him down, I won't kill him. Now lie down." He stood for a moment, apparently torn between me and the door. Abraham decided the matter by coming rigidly awake.

What can a child that young remember? What is the world to them? Is it any more than the warmth and smell of their mothers? Do they take an interest in their surroundings beyond the cradle? When Abraham threw back his head and screamed for everything that his abused body was worth, did he know that his whole world had been savaged or did he only know that his mother was not there?

Richard and I both started for Abraham, but it was too late. The other children were awake and scared and quickly into screams of their own. It is impossible to be a human and ignore these sounds. In the first few hours after the bomb, I saw people whose clothes and skin had been burned away by the blast, digging into the rubble after the sounds of a buried child. These were people who would be dead within days themselves, and yet they held the children in their bloody arms and did what they could.

Jesus came into the hut with Catherine still in his arms. The tribesman came in carrying one of his water bags. Richard and I went to him with our cups, and then we all went to the children. The tribesman moved among them with a smile that betrayed missing and blackened teeth. I noticed too that he was missing the pinkie on one hand, and the thumbnail on the other. The children, though, responded to him better than they did to Richard or me. Perhaps it was his smell, or maybe the color of his skin.

Perhaps the children sensed that the tribesman was a kind person. I came

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to think so. He was the first to remember my wound, and the one who treated it. While Richard and Jesus comforted the children and cooked them breakfast, the tribesman removed his arrow and bandaged the wound. With Jesus translating, I even managed to persuade him to use the supplies from our first aid kit.

The tribesman's name was Naqur. He was one of a group of Thamud tribesmen serving as scouts for the Assyrian army of Tiglath-pileser III. The army had just finished its summer campaign and was en route to its winter quarters. For the Thamud, these were back with the rest of their tribe on the Arabian peninsula. Naqur was out in front of his party, scouting for them as he had previously scouted for the army.

Naqur said that the rest of his tribesmen would be at our village tomorrow, if they did not push on for worry about him when he didn't return that evening. Jesus asked if he thought he should return.

"No," Naqur said. "I think you need me more than my fellows do." I didn't doubt that he was right.

FOUR

I WAS GLAD that there was no way to burn the village's dead. Even once help had begun arriving, it had taken a month to burn all the dead in Nagasaki. The reek of the fires was far worse than the smell in this village, and was always most powerful in the evenings when we would try to eat.

My sister was nine months pregnant when the bomb fell. Her husband was away in the army. He was in one of the last classes to be drafted. He left two weeks after the marriage and never returned. My nephew was born two weeks after the bomb. He was six when he died of leukemia. By the time he died, my sister had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. She survived her son by only a year.

It is impossible to have experienced these things and not ask why were you spared. We the survivors feel guilty to be alive when so many died and continue to die. It is a guilt that destroys lives.

I am a Catholic, but that is understandable. Nagasaki was a Catholic city. It is the port that was opened to the West by the Shoguns, and it is where Japan's oldest cathedral was located. After my sister's death, I found solace

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in Christ and his message of forgiveness. God and Christ gave me my life; I wanted to give them something back, and I decided that it should be their house.

Whatever the politicians and clerics have claimed for themselves since, there is no one person who is responsible for the building of a cathedral. Unable to dig or carry, I did all that I could for the rebuilding. There was paper work to be done, money to collect, supplies to find, workers to hire, and more, but it was not until I met Richard that I learned it might be possible to have Jesus himself bless the cathedral.

I was sitting in the shade of a hut, breathing through my scarf, waving at flies, meditating on my life, and trying not to think about how much longer it was until I could take another pain pill when Richard found me later that afternoon. Ever since Naqur had decided to stay with us, Richard had been spending his free moments looking through my big world history book that he had insisted we bring along.

Richard sat down next to me, pulled down the scarf that covered his mouth and nose, and said, "Seven hundred and thirty-four B.C."

"Is that where we are?"

"First Assyrian invasion of Palestine. They spend the next fifteen years at it. Come in, loot the villages and cities, take the inhabitants back to Assyria for 'resettlement.' Those that are too old or too young for the trip. . .well, look around." I didn't have to. The scene of this village was etched in my mind.

"I've got more good news," Richard went on. "I found the Thamud. They're a legendary Arab tribe out of the Koran. They were visited by a prophet named Salih who performed various miracles and tried to convert them. They wouldn't, so Allah wiped them out. Only Salih and a few followers escaped."

"When?"

"The book says about two years from now, but we can't count on that."

The line of pain ran from just in front of my forehead, through my skull, down my neck, across my shoulder, and down my arm to the arrow wound. "You're afraid that Jesus might interfere with Salih?"

"I'm afraid that Jesus is Salih."

"Yes?"

"Maybe he always has been, or maybe something happened to the other

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Salih this time around. Mine isn't the only cube on Earth. Whatever, our problem is that History deals in results, not names. I think something has disturbed its flow around Salih and the Thamud, and it wants to use us to plug the hole."

Even though I had promised myself that I wouldn't, I checked my watch again. Ten minutes before I could take another pill. I got slowly to my feet. "Well, if that is what is needed. . . ."

"Akira, don't confuse History with your God. There is no more intelligence behind it than there is behind a thunderstorm. The point is that the closer we let Jesus come to taking Salih's place, the more he becomes an integral part of this time, and the more temporal mass he gains. He could become as hard to move as he was in Galilee."

"Which would use all the machine's power again?" I said. The pain was making it hard to think. "We could go backward instead of home?"

"We'd go somewhere like this again, somewhere that History could use us. Or lose us."

"Yes." I gave up and took out my pills.

"I want you to understand," Richard said. "We've been lucky so far. I don't think you appreciate how dangerous this all is." He brought out his cube and looked at it lying in his hand.

"It was 1984 and I was twenty when I first traveled time. I went with a group of my friends, all of them about my age. We went because Zhanken, the Snake, gave us this cube and told us we could use it to visit Woodstock." He looked at me. "The music festival?"

"Yes." I had tried to dry swallow my pill and now I could not tell if it had gone down or if it was stuck in my throat.

"Zhanken is a very old time traveler, famous for his ability to 'find' cubes. His sense of humor isn't human anymore, and he has enemies who chase him through time. When one gets too close, he gives his old cube to a dupe, who his enemies then pursue. A group of decoys, like my friends and me, is even better because we're likely to live longer.

"The cubes take several jumps to adapt to each new user's directions. Zhanken didn't tell us that. He didn't tell us that even when the cubes understand where they are supposed to go, they don't always have the power to get there." Richard tossed the little time machine in the air, watched it drop, and caught it just above the sand. "He didn't explain how few of us

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would ever see Woodstock."

But you did see it, I thought. I asked, "If you had known, would you have taken the cube?"

"Then?" Richard smiled for a moment at the memory. "Yes. Now? No. Now I'm older and wiser and I want to have this over with before it turns uglier."

"I understand. We must hope your time machine recharges before the Thamud arrive."

Five

"SO YOU ADMIT that this is not where you wished us to go?" Jesus said. The four of us were sitting around the small fire we had built in the center of the nursery hut to hold back the night's chill. The children were around us and in our laps.

"Yes," I said.

"And you admit that if we travel again tomorrow, we may still not reach our destination."

"Yes."

"Then we must yield to the hand of God. The Thamud will stop in Jerusalem to trade their plunder. We must travel with them. In Jerusalem, we can do what can be done for my people."

"What is he—whoa!" Richard reached forward to snatch Abraham back from the fire as the child tried to toddle into it.

"He wants to go to Jerusalem with the Thamud. He sees divine intervention in our arriving here."

"Can you explain it to him?"

"I will try." I shifted Moses away from my bad arm, trying to stop him from tugging on the bandage. "Jesus. . . ."

He held up a hand. "Do you know who Tiglath-pileser is?"

"The Assyrian general that Naqur serves."

"Not a general, an Assyrian king. Listen and understand. We are in what is left of Israel at a time when God's kingdom on earth stands as a house divided. Solomon is dead and his people have warred on each other. Now the Assyrians war on the northern half of his kingdom, the Ten Tribes of Israel,

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while their brothers in Judeah watch in glee. Tiglath-pileser is the beginning and Sargon is the end, an end that will see half of God's Chosen scattered across the face of the world.

"When you came to me in the wilderness, you asked that I preach to the survivors of a great disaster in your time. Instead of your time though, I am here in the midst of a disaster as great for my people as surely yours was for yours. If we ignore God's will in bringing us here, then we are as wrong as those in Judeah."

Jacob, another of the toddlers, picked up a ladle and began to bang it against Naqur's knee. Naqur grabbed the ladle and Jacob twisted it in his grasp. I held my breath, praying that Naqur could find a way to protect his leg before the child started crying. Naqur moved a pile of cloth to cover his knee and let go of the ladle. Jacob began banging again, but seemed disappointed that it didn't make the same slapping noise as before.

"We'd have to travel with Naqur and the Thamud," I said. "However much Naqur has helped us, it was he and his people who attacked this village and countless like it."

Jesus shifted Catherine to the crook of his left arm and tickled her chin. "Forgiveness. I will speak among the Thamud. Perhaps they will find remorse for their actions. Perhaps next spring when the Assyrians raise the cry of war, there will be none who answer."

"What about the children?"

"They must come with us."

"He doesn't sound like you're convincing him," Richard observed.

"I am not." I was going to have to go outside soon. Between the smoke of the fire and the effort of talking, I was running out of breath.

"Then let it go. This is a man who will die in agony rather than change his mind. We'll think of something."

Six

WITH THE night breeze and its height, the roof of the hut was as free from the smell of the dead as anywhere in the village. I was lying on it while staring at the stars and doubting myself.

Richard said History was not God, but how could he know? If we could

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bring ourselves to defy Jesus's wishes, what should we do with him? Take him back to his own time? Even if I wasn't sure History was God, I did believe in the power of Jesus's ministry. What good might come to the living dead of my own time who heard him preach?

What good might come to the people of this time if we let Jesus have his way?

The ladder creaked under a man's weight and Jesus appeared over the roof's edge.

"I have come to pray," he said. "Will you join me?"

"Of course," I said. We knelt there on the roof under the desert sky, and I prayed to a God I did not want to defy.

"Do you believe Richard can change events that have already happened?" Jesus asked after a time.

"Yes. What we do now can change things in the future. Richard has told me this and I believe it."

"Good. I believe it too." We were again quiet for a time, both of us still on our knees as the breeze stirred our hair. Then Jesus asked, "How did Richard come to work on the rebuilding of your temple?"

"He came to me one day with. . . " What was Hebrew for photographs? "Drawings of a row of statues that had been over the sacristy. It was the only detailed record we had of them. He offered to help rebuild them, and we gratefully accepted. Later, after I knew of his time machine, Richard admitted to going back and. . . making the drawings after reading that we had no record of the statues."

"So he was in your temple before it was sacked?"

"Yes. He has provided many details of its original appearance."

"If he was in the temple, and he knew the sack was coming, why did he not stop it?"

It felt as if Jesus had struck me. "He could not," I managed. "There was a great engine; he was only one man."

"One man can warn many people."

"They would not have believed him."

"Richard is a smart man. He might have made them believe. He chose not to try." Jesus rose from his knees. He came and laid his hand on my head. "Akira, you believe in God, but you must trust in him as well. Richard does

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not trust, and he believes only in the power of his machine. He imagines that all the ills of the world are his to prevent. He is paralyzed by the amount of horror in his reach, and so he does nothing to combat it.

"We cannot be like that, Akira. We must listen when God calls. We must do his will. You helped save these few of God's children. Will you not help save them all?"

"Yes. If we can. If. . . ." I trailed off. Richard had the cube and the experience. I trusted his judgment, but I had never looked at him in this light before. Jesus took his hand from my head and drew me to my feet.

"We can, but perhaps you should go back now," he said. "I think Moses misses you."

"Yes," I said.

Richard was coming out of the hut as I came down the ladder. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "You look like someone tapped you with a sledge hammer."

"I feel. . . dazed. Richard, if Jesus succeeds in uniting the halves of Israel, will our future still exist?"

Richard's head jerked a little in surprise at the question. He answered warily. "Probably. History would have a lot of years to keep things the way they are. Still, I doubt Jesus would get the chance to change the history of Israel. My guess is that events would carry him into the role of Salih."

"So there would be no harm in letting him try?"

"That depends on what you call harm. Our future is probably safe, but I couldn't say the same for us."

There was certainly that, I thought. And yet. "How did you come to work on the rebuilding of the cathedral?"

"I told you that." In the starlight, Richard looked me up and down. "Are you sure you're all right? You didn't take too many pain pills?"

"There are thousands of mysteries that you could solve," I said. "I am forever in your debt, but why did you choose to help carve our statues?"

Richard was silent for a moment. I could not tell if he was angry or embarrassed. "I saw the cathedral before the war," he said finally. "It was beautiful and I wanted to help restore it."

"Why? Why not stop it from being destroyed?"

"Akira." Richard grasped my shoulders and stared into my eyes. "I'm

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sorry about your family and I'm sorry about the war, but I'm one man. Even if I could save your city without getting us killed, what about the other cities? Tokyo. Dresden. We'd have to stop the whole war, and if we did, what about the one before that? How many chances would we get? When would we stop? What was that you said when we got here?"

I found myself relaxing in his grip. My friend was neither angry nor embarrassed. He was just worried about me. As ever. I smiled and told him. "'What did you do today?'"

"'I did what I could,'" he said.

"Yes. We must go to Jerusalem with Jesus and the Thamud."

"Akira."

"It is what we can do. Jesus wants to save his people. We have brought him this close; we owe him the chance to go on. Who did we build the cathedral to honor? How beautiful will it be if we turn our backs on what it stands for?"

"What about your arm? What if the rest of the Thamud are as happy to see us as Naqur was? How beautiful will the cathedral be if we never return to see it? It's hard, I know, but we can't count the fall of every sparrow. It'll cost us our lives to try."

It is only because of God that I am still alive, I thought, but I could not say it. I could not end this the way I had saved the children, or we would have this argument every day forever. I had to reach something in Richard besides his friendship for me. I said, "What is the cost of our safety? It has been forty years and I still see the faces of the bomb victims I tried to save. How would they haunt me if I had ignored them?

"What about you, Richard? If you had killed these children to save our lives, if you had killed Naqur to avenge me, would you have had to take their pictures? Or would you have been able to carve their faces from memory?"

"You fuc–" Richard let go of my shoulders, turned his back on me, and yanked his time machine from his pocket. He took two steps, paused, took two more, and then turned toward me again. He blinked three times, and rubbed his forehead. "Funny," he said, "I didn't even see you pick up that sledge hammer." He smiled. I smiled back, my vision of him vanishing into time, fading as my breathing resumed.

"All right," Richard said. "We'll stick around as long as we can. I warn

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you though, if your arm gets worse, we're going straight to a hospital."

"Yes." From inside the hut, there came a crash followed by a curse from Naqur. One of the children yelled, and then another began crying. Richard looked at the hut and then back to me.

"It's not too late to change our minds," he said.

"Yes, it is," I said, and led him into the growing din.

"Wow! I won a $275 jackpot while I was alive and now this!"

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Jack Williamson's next novel, Demon Moon, *is awaiting publication. His most recent appearance in F&SF was in our October/November issue in 1992. For more on Jack's career, please see the editorial.*

"The Litlins" was originally a novel idea that didn't quite have enough material to sustain a longer work. Luckily for us, Jack has turned it into a strong science fiction story.

The Litlins

By Jack Williamson

MAROONED ON MARS FOR twenty years, I escaped alone.

We had come feeling like young gods staking out a new creation. Landing the shuttle in the great Hellas Basin, we brought the reactor module down for power and the main cabin for a temporary habitat, set up the signal system, ran rover surveys, and waited through a long Mars year for the *Marineris* to bring the relief team and take us home. It never came. We never knew why. All we ever had was a single brief message from the lunar relay station.

"*Marineris* scrubbed. Explanation to follow."

No explanation followed, nor anything else. Listening when Earth swung back around the sun, all we heard was a garbled distress call that seemed to come from a military spacecraft we could not identify.

"...station abandoned... enemy... litlins aboard..."

That was all. We could only wonder who the enemy had been and what litlins were, though we had left the world in trouble enough. Ozone depletion, global warming, glaciers and icecaps thawing, lowlands flooding,

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uplands gone to desert, famines everywhere. That's why we'd come to Mars, inspired by grand dreams of doing better on a new and unspoiled planet. Eight of us.

Eight was not enough.

Waiting for rescue through conjunction after slow conjunction, we'd watched the blue Earth appear and brighten slowly in the murky dawns and dusks as its orbit brought it past us, watched it fade and vanish, till all hope had died. No relief craft ever came, nor any signal we could hear.

Fungus killed the greenhouse crops. Something in the dust proved deadly to us, and dust was everywhere. Lifted by storm winds when the seasons changed, it dyed the whole sky tomato-red. When our masks and medical supplies ran out, it killed three men and two women. Companions I had nursed and fought, helped and hated, learned to love, finally grieved.

Left with only Olga and Elena, I decided to go home.

Elena coughed and spat red dust and asked if I meant to teleport.

"Why?" Olga asked. "What can you hope to find?"

I couldn't teleport, but we had the lander and nothing else to live for. The old *Olympus* was still out in orbit, though cannibalized of engine and life support and even half the wiring. Loyally, sick and weak as we all were, they toiled with me through more cruel years, rebuilding it. Even with the reactor finally back in place and fuel mass aboard, we had space and life support for only one.

When the takeoff window opened, Olga tossed the smooth-worn ten-ruble lucky piece that had brought so little luck to anybody. I called heads. Elena picked up the coin, made a face at me, and whispered that she'd always meant to die a Martian. She tossed it again. Olga snatched it before I could see, and said its luck had never been for her. Accepting that, swallowing the shame, I took off alone.

Earth looked lovely when I got near enough to see its disk, blue and swirled with blazing white against the dark, but my calls from space got no response I understood. TV signals were flickering blurs, radio a chorus of squeaks that might have come from a colony of mice.

Nearer, I searched the clouds and haze for Texas, where I was born. My happiest times had been the long summers on my Uncle Clint's hill country ranch, riding fence through the mesquite, rounding up the longhorns he bred because he said they were survivors, listening to the sad Mexican songs the *vaqueros* sang. I longed for it now, an island of permanence and peace.

Clint had liked me enough to hint that it might come down to me if I

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wanted to stay with him. That seemed too easy. Looking for a larger life, I'd won the Zorch scholarship that took me through to grad school and finally all the way to Mars.

Zorch never intended that. He was a genetic engineer, driven by his own wild dream that he could breed mutant plants magical enough to feed the crowded planet. Neidra Norn and I had been among his "wizard kids," as the media liked to call us, the bright youngsters he chose from nowhere and trained to staff his research lab.

Brighter than I was, Neidra had been slim and violet-eyed, as lovely as her unlikely name. She'd loved me, I never knew why. We lived together till she went into Zorch's Bion Labs after graduation. She wanted me with her, but I'd caught my own dream of Mars from the videos the probes brought back.

She cried the rest of the night when I told her I was going, and made me come with her to see Zorch next morning. She worshiped him, a huge bear of a man with a bullfrog voice and ambitions as large as Earth. His office was half laboratory, walled with workbenches and computer terminals and a tall electron microscope.

What caught my eye was the odd clutter of toys on his desk. A model steam engine I'd have given half my life for when I was seven years old. A tiny power hammer loaded on a mouse-sized truck that looked ready to run. Enough perfect little miniatures to equip a doll's machine shop, and neat little plastic cases lined with foam shaped to fit them.

Lovely toys, but why did he want them?

He was showing Neidra a new computer, a working model so tiny that he held a reading glass over it and used a toothpick to touch the keys. I got only a nod till she told him I wanted to break my contract with the corporation. He glared at me then with an outrage I never forgot, his eyes the color of steel behind old-fashioned black-rimmed glasses.

"Mars, Kellahin?" he roared at me. "What do you want on Mars?"

I tried to say.

"Nothing there!" he cut me off. "If you're looking for a better human future, Bion's building it here. With bio-engineering. We can create food for a thousand times the people. And create space for them to live in."

He had no time to hear my startled skepticism.

"Wait." He shook his head at Neidra when she wanted to explain. "Let him wait till our patents clear."

Her sick face made me sorry for her, but I broke the contract and went on to Mars. Now, searching the cloudy planet for Texas, I thought their vast

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dreams must have failed as dismally as mine.

FLIGHT SKILLS dulled by those twenty years, I had to circle the planet twice to find the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Dust fever and Martian gravity had left me helpless against the gees of landing. I tried to set the lander's robot pilot to set us down at DFW. I must have bungled.

We crashed. Groggily conscious afterward, I found myself trapped in the flattened pilot bubble, too heavy to move. Aching everywhere, I felt blood drying stickily on my face. I lay trapped in the wreckage, listening for help that never came.

Once I heard a tiny scurry somewhere under me. It paused and came again, seemed nearer, passed above, and finally ceased. I heard no fire, felt no heat, smelled no smoke. My bruises throbbed, but I found no broken bones. A ray of hot sunlight struck through a shattered viewport overhead. It showed a scrap of blue and dazzling sky, good to see after the dull red murk of Mars, but never a human face.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I wormed to reach a water bottle and the last of my hoarded rations. The yellow sunbeam crawled across my chest and climbed the crumpled metal around me, narrowed and died. I slept and shivered and ached in the dark, woke and hoped again.

On the third day, hammering and prying my way with a steel bar broken off the seat, I reached the escape hatch. It was jammed. I battered at it till I passed out, battered and passed out again, till it came open on a wet and unrevealing dusk. At last, next morning, I crawled off the lander into a hot glare of sunlight on empty runways.

A flock of crows cawed and rose, but I saw nothing else alive. The fields of flat gray concrete showed no harm except from years of weathering. The standing airliners bore faded names and emblems I remembered, but no engines screamed. The jetways at the terminal gates lay where storms had tumbled them, twisted crazily, bleached rags and weathered oddments from broken luggage scattered around them. Except for the crows, the only sound I heard was a dry rattle of something against my foot.

A naked human skull in a pile of time-bleached bones.

I stood there a long time, numbed and reeling, wondering blankly why I should care. My old dream of returning to a brighter life with Neidra had faded long ago. Olga and Elena were doubtless dead by now. Was I a modern ghost, lost in a world of ghosts, with nothing better left to live for?

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Yet I had to care. In our hard training for the mission and the harder years on Mars, I'd learned to look to basics and keep myself alive. Whatever the catastrophe, I was here, I was hungry, the water bottle empty. If the killer of the planet was still at work, I had to know its name.

Clues, however, were hard to find.

Tall weeds and here and there a sapling had pushed through cracked concrete, which must mean that many years had passed since the last planes took off. I saw no marks of bombs or fire or any source of harm. I glanced into an ambulance and saw a huddle of bones. Yet most of the rusting vehicles looked undamaged, as if they had simply been abandoned. An open doorway let me peer into the terminal; sickening odors kept me out. Death must have came fast and unforeseen.

Still too weak for the gravity, I scrabbled for tarnished keys among the bones beside an empty police car and climbed inside. The battery had died long ago. Walking on when I found strength and will to walk, I took all morning getting off the airport into the suburbs around it. Once-neat homes stood ruined in forests of shrubs grown to trees, shingles missing, gutters falling, broken windows blind. Looking into them, I discovered skeletons and evil odors, but nothing left alive.

Giddy with thirst and hunger before noon came, I used a rock to smash my way into a convenience store that looked intact. Mice and rats had been at the stock, but the roof had not leaked. I found unrusted cans of sausage and tomatoes and corn, washed them down with dead and tasteless diet sodas. That night I slept in an empty van that puzzled me with the dimming legends on its sides.

LITLIN ERADICATION
EXTERMINATION AND PREVENTION
IF YOU SEE ONE, YOU'VE GOT A HUNDRED HIDING

Odd tools and tanks and coils of plastic tubing lay rotting and rusting in the van. Gear for killing litlins? Some rat-like household pest that must have become something worse? I had no way to know.

In a still and blazing afternoon, I blundered out of that soundless desolation into something stranger. Beyond the cracked and weedy pavement of an unused highway, I came upon a seamless carpet of something that looked like moss or very short grass stretching off as far as I could see.

Nothing broke that velvet turf, no trees or homes or barns or other works

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of man. No creature grazed it. No bird or insect flew. Billboards behind me had peeled or faded or fallen; beyond that empty road something had removed them all. I heard no sound, saw no motion — till something whined and I saw a doll-sized police car darting toward me on a road I had overlooked, a strip of gray pavement not half a meter wide. Far away along it, I found the rooftops of a distant town.

Red-tiled houses on tree-lined streets. Half a dozen taller buildings around a bright golden dome. A freight train creeping along a row of grain elevators. I stood wondering if I had strength to walk there till I heard the police siren shrilling like an angry hornet and saw six-inch men tumbling out of the car.

Perception had shifted when I looked again. The town had become a city of toys, hardly a quarter-mile away. Or was I gone mad? Sick from too many riddles, I groped for anything I could understand. This was my native Earth. The cloudless sky was softly blue, not the orange-red of Mars. The air was warm and natural, scented with a summer sweetness. I breathed with no need of pressure gear. The hot sun felt good on my naked face.

Yet terror gripped me.

I stood there swaying, the gravity abruptly crushing. This toy world was a second jolt, more dazing than all the evidence of holocaust behind me. Through all those desperate years on Mars, I'd imagined mischance in many shapes, but none so utterly insane.

Had this different oxygen and gravity done something to my brain? Or was I still on Mars, sick from starvation and the bitter dust, dying perhaps in Elena's arms, all these dreadful riddles of mankind's end and this Lilliputian landscape my last hallucinations?

Lilliputian?

The word echoed in my mind. Were these tiny people the "litlins?" The "enemy" of that final signal? Or was all this only my own sick imagination? I blinked and peered again at that golden dome and the flat velvet landscape beyond it. Taller shapes rose along the green horizon, most of them mysterious, though one cluster of taller towers might have been some artist's dream of his ideal future world.

Something stung my neck. Rubbing at the spot, I found the unhealed cuts from the crash, the hard flakes of dried blood, the rough stubble on my chin. All sticky with grime and sweat, too real to be illusion. What was I to think?

The sting began to burn. Numbness spread across my cheek. My head

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swam. Uncertain of anything, I heard another insect whine and a high-pitched squeaking at my feet. A tiny ambulance had followed the police car, and little men were tumbling out of it to aim tiny cameras at me and the enormous footprints I had left in the field.

I staggered away, the dead human city behind me seeming suddenly simpler and safer than this crazy toyland. The police car jolted off the road to follow me, mosquito siren shrieking. I tried to run and stumbled. Something came droning close to my head. Clumsily, I batted at it. My hand struck nothing, but I saw a hawk-sized aircraft climbing away.

Something popped. Something popped again. Little puffs of gray-green smoke expanded around my head. A whiff of hot and acrid bitterness took my breath. I knew I was falling, and tried not to crush the little men....

I woke naked, lying in bed between clean sheets. For only an instant, I clung to a dream where I had been a child again, back in my mother's home and eager to open a birthday gift from my Uncle Clint, perhaps the cowboy boots I'd longed for. Shocked wide awake when memory came, I discovered a gray-walled room around me, a normal human bedroom, almost a copy of my old room at home.

No bruises ached when I moved. Gravity was no longer quite so crushing. Fingering my face, I found it shaven smooth, beard and grime and clotted blood removed, the lacerations of the crash smoothly healed. Or was this another dream?

Music came on when I sat up. The score of *Transmania*, which had been a hit the year we went to space. I was alone, no little men visible. Clean and neatly compact, the room contained a tall bookcase standing at one end, a table and chair by an open doorway, two windows in the opposite wall.

Only one window, really. The other perplexed me till I saw that it was a holographic picture, so sharp that the people in it looked almost alive. They stood on a hill, a rosy halo bathing them. I stepped closer, and they took my breath.

Neidra Norn and Herman Zorch!

They stood together. Zorch smiled down through those odd black-rimmed glasses at a little man and woman kneeling on the palms of his two open hands. A tiny girl between the two was offering him a huge red rosebud, its stem as tall as she was.

I stood there a long time, trying to find some sense in the scene. The little people wore expressions of rapt devotion. A tender pride lit Neidra's eyes, but

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Zorch's austere features were etched with lines of pain or sorrow. The whole scene dumbfounded me again.

I remembered those tiny machines on his desk, and the miracles they'd expected from genetic engineering. Were the litlins their creation? A lunatic experiment gone unthinkably wrong?

Shaking and weak in the knees, I sat back on the side of the bed. The holograph had changed when I looked again. Zorch had raised those steel-blue eyes, staring away as if he saw some arresting vision in the sky. The little people had turned to Neidra, the child offering her the gigantic rose. Lips parted as if to speak, she seemed so real that I shut my eyes against the pain of memory.

Yet I had learned to live with all the cruelties of Mars. When my breathing had slowed, I walked to the actual window. That green velvet landscape sloped to the shore of a calm blue lake. Perhaps half a mile beyond it, the silvery domes and spires of another fairy city shimmered in the sunlight. A miniature train came fast around the lake and across a graceful bridge. I watched till it was gone.

Calm enough by then to look for a bathroom, I found it beyond that open doorway, the fixtures new and shining. Clean bath mats outside the shower, clean towels on the rods, clean garments on the dressing table. After all my years of rationed and recycled water, this should have been sheer luxury. It wasn't. I took a long time there, blankly groping for answers I never found.

Out of the shower, I got into the garments, pajamas cut from some soft blue stuff. Beyond the other door, I discovered a little kitchen that would have delighted my mother, the table set, a hot platter of ham and scrambled eggs ready for me, the toast crisp and hot, a steaming urn filling the air with a coffee fragrance I had almost forgotten.

Jittery when I sat at the table, I found a sudden appetite. Ham and eggs struck me as omens of better things to come. If normal pigs and chickens still existed in some island of survival, could it also be the human haven I still hoped for? Could Zorch and Neidra be waiting for me there, somehow still alive?

A little relaxed, I sipped a second cup of coffee, rinsed my dishes, put them in the washer, and tried the farther door. It let me outside, to a roofed portico. I saw no bars, no prison wall, but I recalled that aircraft diving past me and those exploding puffs of greenish smoke that must have knocked me out.

What did the litlins plan for me?

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Unnerved with a sudden dread, I darted out across the scrap of lawn and collided with something that bloodied my nose. Something like invisible glass. Yelling senseless curses, I hammered at it with my fists till spatters of blood hung in the empty-seeming air and nausea doubled me over.

Yet I kept my breakfast down. Whatever the little people wanted, I must find Zorch and Neidra, beg them for the truth. I stood leaning weakly back against that queer barrier until my breath had slowed and I found the will to examine it. Something hard and slick as glass, it rose out of the turf and bent overhead to form a seamless dome with no trace of any opening.

I turned at last to inspect the building. A neat brick bungalow, it might have belonged on any suburban street in the world I had known. Here, contained like a clock under a jar, it seemed grotesquely enormous, a surreal riddle.

My sanctum sanctorum, if the litlins had taken me for a god? My test tube, if I was a specimen giant captured for study? My cage, for public exhibition? My jail, if they meant to hold me as a dangerous trespasser?

Groping for any hint, I followed the wall around it. Still I saw no little men anywhere near, though a toy ship had appeared on the lake. Nearer, a score of red-spotted, kitten-sized cattle were peacefully grazing that green velvet turf. Just outside the barrier, I found a rectangle of empty gray pavement almost as long as the house.

Narrow roads and railways converged on it, and a string of neat little freight cars stood on the brink of a deep square pit. A bright metal cylinder taller than the house rose out of the pit. Equipment installed to construct and maintain the building? Certainly a monumental achievement of the Lilliputian engineers, though I found their cleverness hard to admire.

I stood there forever, with no will to move. The toy trains passed and passed again. The ship disappeared. The little cattle grazed out of view beyond a grove of tiny trees. The dust on Mars had ruined my watch, but the hot white sun climbed to the zenith. Suddenly tired and hungry, I went back inside.

Music came on as I entered. *The Martian Symphony*, commissioned by the mission planners to celebrate our expected conquest of the planet. I drank a glass of water at the kitchen sink, faintly grateful that it had no recycled taint. I used the bathroom and started back toward the kitchen. Abruptly, the music gave way to a squeaky chittering. Lights came on. The top of the bookcase had become a miniature stage. A little man stood behind a lectern there, chirping into a tiny microphone.

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"Hello!" I froze where I stood, blinking at him. "Hello?"

He looked up to listen, bowed deeply toward me, and waved me toward the chair. I sat stiffly, braced for another jolt, while he twittered again into the microphone and then stood aside to listen through tiny headphones.

"The people greet you, Mr. Giant. We wish you well." His words came deliberate and loud from speakers on the shelf beneath him. "Be patient, I beg you."

"Patient?" I gasped. "For what?"

That dull thunder rolled on as if I hadn't spoken.

"...because your speech must be recorded and accelerated to let me understand you, as my own is slowed and amplified for you. I am Leonardo Galen, honored to be chosen as our ambassador to you. I believe your name was Kellahin?"

"*Was?*" I shuddered at the tense. "I am Jeff Kellahin. Are Herman Zorch and Neidra Norn — "

Not listening, he was already squeaking into his little microphone. I sat staring at him. Except for size, he looked as human as I was. A slender, dark-haired man in a neat dark suit. He seemed warily cautious, as if I might be dangerous, yet intent on his business. He stepped away from the lectern, and the speakers boomed again.

"Mr. Giant, the people are happy to welcome your unexpected return. We shall serve you in every way we can. We have done our utmost to prepare an adequate shelter for you. Though we found no infection in you, hazards still exist and you must remain inside. You have seen the remains of your fellow beings who were exposed."

"Exposed to what?" He ducked as if my shout was deafening. "What killed them?"

"I beg you, sir, to calm yourself." He raised tiny hands in protest. "You're in no danger now, not in this sterile space. Certainly not from any of us. We are too grateful for our creation to let you suffer any harm."

"Grateful to us? When you've murdered millions — "

He was shrilling again, shaking his head.

"We pity you, sir. Evolution can be ruthless to an elder species when it must give way to the younger, but we shall ease the life left to you in every way we can. At least you should feel pride in us."

Cold horror choked my unbelieving laugh.

"Sir, please!" the speakers rumbled to reprove me. "You appear to have reached a false conclusion. We are a peaceful folk, created free of the vestigial

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jungle drives that led to all your fatal aggressions."

"If that's so, what hap — "

His speakers squalled and went silent. He ran to fuss with them, and I saw that the holograph had changed again. Zorch and Neidra and even the little family were all staring at me now, so real that I shuddered.

"What happened to us?"

"Extinction." He had chirped like a bird and the speakers pealed again, almost in Zorch's booming voice. "The tragic culmination of your history of violence."

"Neidra?" Whispering hoarsely now, I gestured at the picture. "Neidra Norn? Herman Zorch? Are they — are they dead?"

"Mother Norn? Father Zorch?" His rumble paused, and I caught a tremor of awe. "They were our creators. They left the best of themselves in our genes, to live forever."

"You — you little rat!" A burst of anger choked me when I thought I understood. "If you claim — "

He twittered and dashed aside.

"Forgive me, sir." With an apologetic smile, he bowed and spread his hands. "Our size may deceive you, but Mother Norn edited our genome to make us truly superior, deleting the unfortunate animal survivals that led to your extinction. If we are smaller than you, or even your giant rats, that is because our smaller body cells are therefore more efficient.

"With nerve paths only a tenth as long, we react in a tenth the time. We live faster, a dozen generations to one of yours. We think faster, learn faster. We are kinder to the environment, each needing less than one percent of the living space you did, and a tinier fraction of the energy and mass."

"Which made you able to exterminate us?"

He chirked indignantly.

"Never, Mr Giant! Please try to contain your savage impulses."

He stopped to shake his head at the fists I didn't know I'd clenched. I opened them and simply sat there, stunned and staring, till he resumed.

"Sadly, sir, your people never accepted us for what we were, designed to shield you from yourselves and your suicidal destruction of the planet. Our first generations helped perfect our own genome. The next set out to save you. In your factories, our dexterities allowed us to excel in the production of the improved electronic and robotic devices and new plant species that might have enabled your survival. We became researchers, inventors, engineers. We toiled in every way we could to bring peace, to teach altruism,

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to end your famines, to avert calamity.

"Yet you hated us. You accused the creators of blasphemous trespass into the dominion of your God, and spread false rumors that they were using us to seize world dominion. You burned the factories and laboratories that employed us. You attacked us on the streets and killed us in our homes. You enacted laws against us — laws that made us less than your monster rats. You hunted us with dogs and guns. You forced us to live in hiding and paid bounties for our dead bodies."

"Till you struck back?"

"Mr. Giant, please!" With a sharp little squeal of indignation, he bent back to his microphone. "The creators deleted the genes that drove your cruel competitions for survival. We do not kill. Instead, with never a thought of turning your own savagery against you, we dug deeper tunnels. We destroyed your traps, sabotaged your detectors and alarms, immunized ourselves against your viruses. We built our own aircraft — flight comes easy for the small — and fled to new colonies where you never found us."

"So you say!" I shouted at him. "But I've seen the murdered city — "

"Wait, Mr. Giant! Let the Mother speak before you condemn us."

He scurried off the bookcase. Left there alone with the holograph, I found that it had changed again. Zorch and Neidra were kneeling now. He watched the little family as they ran toward me out of that pink nimbus. She smiled down at the red rosebud the child had left in her hand. Still somehow happy, even now, among these Lilliputian killers?

Wondering dully at the little man's excuses, I recalled my first boyhood summer with my Uncle Clint, roving his ranch with a spotted mongrel named Tige. To keep me entertained when I got homesick, Uncle Clint hired me to get rid of the rats in his barn. Tige loved the sport as much as I did, and we had grand fun. There were rats enough, living under the floor and hiding behind the sacks of grain and bales of hay. They were shy and quick and clever, but we kept after them. We dug them from under the trash. Tige ran them down. I set traps and shot them with my .22. When the hunts were over, I laid them out on the barn floor to be counted and paid for. The bounty was fifty cents a rat. I'd earned twenty-eight dollars and felt great about it then, though the recollection gave me an odd feeling now.

The little man was suddenly back at his lectern on the bookcase.

"Hear the Mother!" his speakers thundered.

Glancing at the holograph, I found the little people gone. Zorch and Neidra still knelt on that little hill. She seemed to look straight at me. No

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longer smiling, she was tense and white as I remembered her the day I left for Mars.

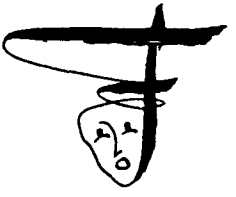
"Call this my last — last confession." Her voice caught unsteadily, but only for an instant. "The decision is made. History now, gone beyond erasing. The best I can do is set things straight, at least for our inheritors. A cruel choice, but events left us no other. Quarrels over the stumps and stubble of our wasted world had brought us to the brink of Armageddon. Ultimatums. Terror bombs. Sneak attacks. Raid alerts. Wars declared.

"In those final desperate days, people blamed us. Blamed *Homo novus*. Out of ignorance, out of the old tribal hated of the alien, out of sheer hysteria. We were arrested, Dr. Zorch and all of the genetic staff. Under threat of a firing squad or worse, we were ordered to create a counter-weapon, an airborne virus quick and deadly enough to wipe *novus* out forever.

"Impossible, we told them. Too risky for any attempt. Our genomes were so closely kin that a small error could kill both races. They learned, however, that the computer code for such a virus already existed, written as a safety measure to put a period to *novus* if they'd gone wrong. Under desperate pressure as the nation mobilized, one of our top biochemists revealed it. A hard decision, he told us, but made to save humanity. He didn't know we'd foreseen the crisis months ago, and made our own harder choice. The choice to save the best of the brave race we had been.

"We'd rewritten the killer code."

Her solemn voice ceased. The holograph flickered. She and Zorch were gone. The little people had come closer, and the smiling child seemed to offer me a huge yellow bloom like none I had ever seen. When I looked back at the bookcase, the little man had vanished with his lectern. The holograph flashed and faded to a dead flat blank. I sat alone in the silent room.



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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 59

To honor summer (now long gone, alas), we asked you to give us a peek into sf writers' private lives by showing us their families. Although we received many responses, most of you were woefully uncreative (Jack Q. King simply is not funny the second time around, let alone the fifth or sixth). This competition's prizes go to those who should never be allowed to name children.

FIRST PRIZE goes to Sean J. Harvey and Lori M. Wyndham (no relation to that Triffid guy, or so they say) of Moncks Corner, S.C., who, in a fit of unrestrained punning, came up with not one but several families:

The Orson Scott Card Family:

Hall Mark Card, who writes bad poetry; **Q. Card**, from Hollywood; **Flash Card**, Racecar driver and math tutor; **I.D. Card**, who works for the highway department; **Greene Card**, who works in immigration and naturalization; and **A.T.M. Card**, bank president.

Assorted relations of other writers:

Robert's cousin, **Hi O. Silverberg**, a cowboy.

Jack Chalker's cousin **Traci**, police crime scene investigator. Jerry Pournelle's cousin **Nell**, a hypochondriac. And of course, Robert Bloch's son, **Chip**.

SECOND PLACE goes to Arthur D. Hlavaty of Yonkers, New York whose spare but witty entry is an example to families everywhere:

Child Ballard, postmodern folklorist; **Q. Chalker**, billiards champion; **Amana Friesner**, appliance tycoon; and **Joseph W. Campbell, Jr.**, editor, *Astounding Myths*.

RUNNERS UP

Berkeley Busby, relative of F.M., Choreographer of Danse Macabre *on* mirrors.

— Mary Sullivan
Cincinnati, OH

L. Ron Hubbard's eleven older brothers: **A.** through **K. Ron Hubbard**, and his fourteen younger brothers, **M.** through **Z. Ron Hubbard.**

— Peter Brown
Gainesville, FL

Ralph Harlan Ellison, fourth cousin of Harlan Ellison. His novella, "Invisible Man and His Dog" has yet to find a publisher.

— James Williamson
Omaha, NE

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COMPETITION 60 (suggested by G. David Nordley)

TWISTERS: The Berkeley alumni magazine, *California Monthly*, recently presented a literary word game which can easily be adopted to the SF genre. The rules of this game are that you get to change one and only one letter (or number) in the title of your favorite novel, and then write a brief description to go with the revised title. For example:

The Fall of Toon Dust (A busload of your favorite animated characters gets trapped by a special effects moonquake.)

1994 (With big sister watching, the Winter Olympics become politically correct.)

Got it? Go for it. Send your answers by December 15.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Road, W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Entries must be received by December 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

PRIZES: First prize, eight different hardcover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different SF paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 60 will appear in the April issue.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

JANUARY MARKS the advent of 1994 (My goodness, whoever thought we would make it ten years past 1984?), and we plan to start the year with a bang.

First **Ray Aldridge** returns after too long an absence. "Filter Feeders" is a haunting dark fantasy tale about a lonely woman and the mysterious strangers she meets off the Gulf Coast.

Hugo and Nebula nominee **Jack McDevitt** makes his first appearance ever in *F&SF* with a subtle sf story. "Standard Candles" is a tale about aging, love, and what might have been. A do not miss story.

Robert A. Metzger provides both the needed humor and the inspiration for Ilene Myers' stunning cover. In "Planet of the Dolphins," crazed dolphins appear from the future to murder important people in the past. Only one man has enough vision to understand the danger this presents to the world. One man, with a history of mental illness...

Also in January, we'll have some holiday cheer and a few ghosts of Christmas present. The new year will also bring some wonderful surprises. **Elizabeth Hand, Carolyn Ives Gilman, R. Garcia y Robertson, Ian MacLeod, Dean Whitlock,** and **Robert Reed** have inspired a set of gorgeous covers. **Esther M. Friesner, Jerry Oltion,** and **Kent Patterson** add humor to the mix. Round that out with novelettes from **Richard Bowes,** and **Marc Laidlaw**, add short stories by **James Morrow** and **Nancy Springer**, and 1994 promises to be a spectacular year.

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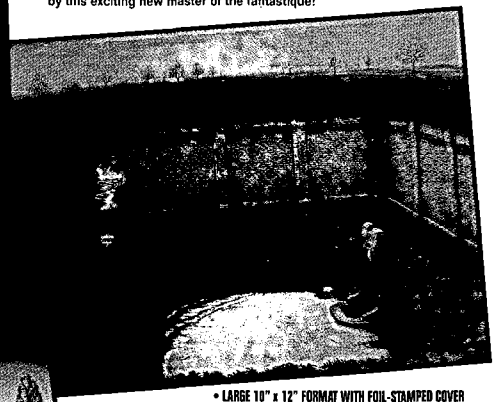

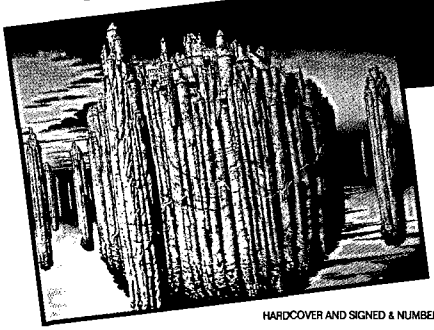

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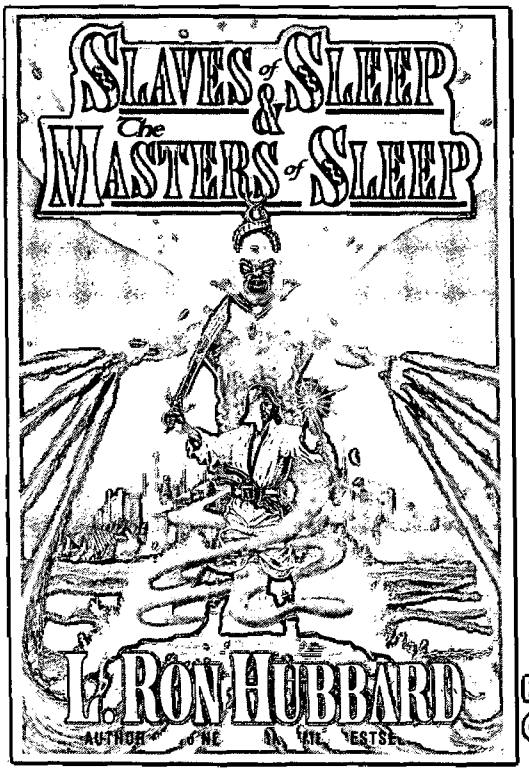

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